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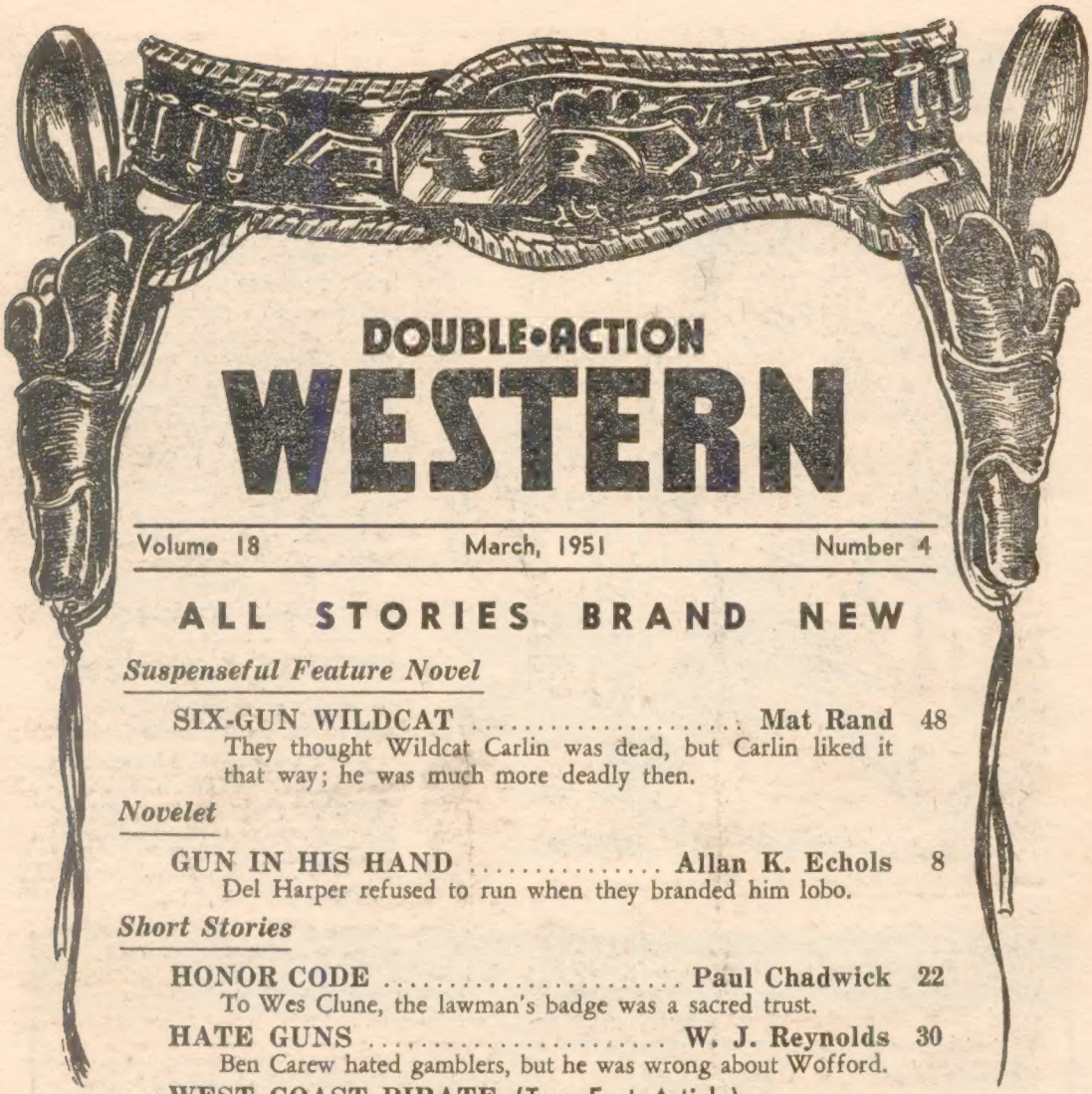

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 18 March, 1951 Number 4

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW

Suspenseful Feature Novel

SIX-GUN WILDCAT ..... Mat Rand 48
They thought Wildcat Carlin was dead, but Carlin liked it that way; he was much more deadly then.

Novelet

GUN IN HIS HAND ..... Allan K. Echols 8
Del Harper refused to run when they branded him lobo.

Short Stories

HONOR CODE ..... Paul Chadwick 22
To Wes Clune, the lawman's badge was a sacred trust.
HATE GUNS ..... W. J. Reynolds 30
Ben Carew hated gamblers, but he was wrong about Wofford.
WEST COAST PIRATE (True Fact Article)
..... Rex Whitechurch 38
STORM STAKES ..... Cliff Walters 40
Andy Shawnell hadn't been accused of murder, but . . .
THE STRANGLERS OF DODGE CITY (True Fact Article)
..... Wayne D. Mote 45

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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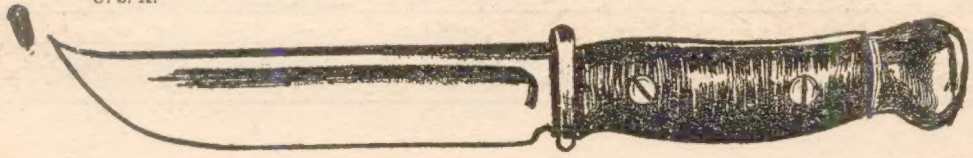

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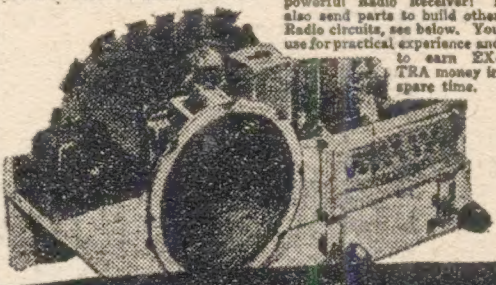

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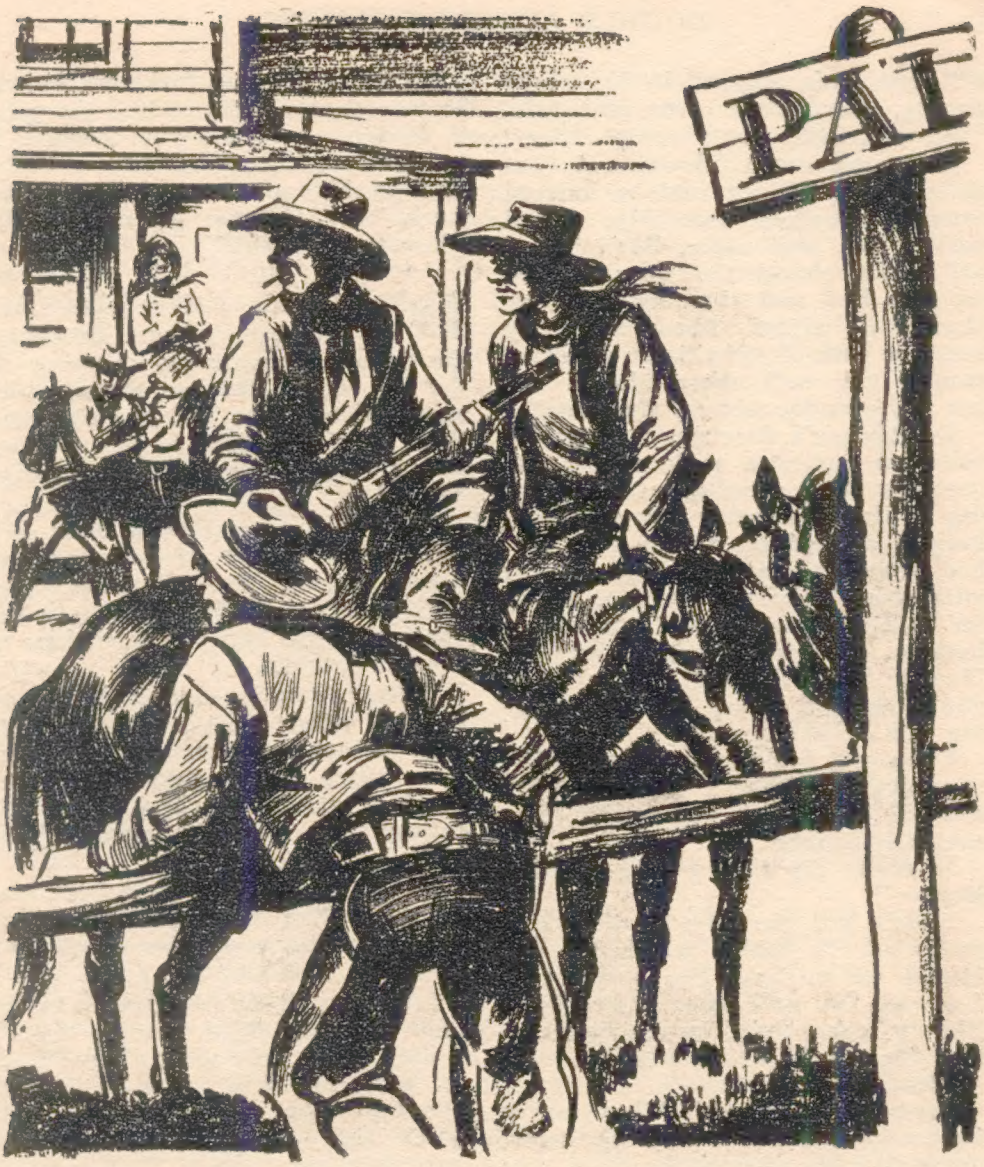
"Your lobos rode down my brother, Harper!"

GUN in his HAND

ACTION-PACKED NOVELET

by Allan K. Echols

NOW, AFTER five dreary years, Del Harper was back in Mill Creek Valley, and the homecoming was a bitter one. Three years in a notoriously tough prison; two years on parole, trying to stay away from his home range. It gave a man plenty of time to remember



"I waited for two years after I was paroled to make sure I could come back and fight to hold my head up among my neighbors. Then, when I was sure — I walk into this and find myself branded a lobo leader. Well, I ain't runnin' from it; I'm here for the purpose of gettin' right with my former neighbors, and I'm gonna do it — unless that posse kills me!"

how pleasant had been this place, time to dream of coming home to rest.

But it wasn't to be so restful, he saw quickly. Here in Juan Contreras' saloon, men glanced at him, stopped to stare, then turned their heads, busying themselves with their own conversation, bringing tension to the room, bringing a tightness to his throat.

Juan Contreras came out from his

office in back, stopped in his tracks staring, then came over and said, "We talk, huh? Come in my office."

Contreras was a fair-skinned Castillian from Mexico, and he dressed smoothly, walked smoothly, talked with a low, soft voice. Back in his office he closed the door, looked long at Del and then said: "Why should we fight? There is money here for both of us without we make trouble for each other. No? I can not pay you for run my business."

Del Harper's face was a mask. He rolled a cigarette with steady fingers, his mind chewing on the meaning of this. Contreras was a saloonkeeper, a gambler, and a man who had proved he could defend himself with either a knife or a gun, but as far as Del knew, he was one square hombre. He made a sudden decision. "Look, Juan. I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not fighting you. What is this?"

Contreras looked at him coldly, suspiciously. "No?" His eyebrows arched. "You say you won't play square with me?"

"I didn't say that. I said I didn't know—"

"Don't tell me thees," Contreras answered. "I make talk with you fair. I am no fool. But I tell you, I no pay you notheengs, see? I don't like to make fight, but I fight before I pay you. Un'erstand?"

"Juan, you're crazy—"

Contreras shrugged. "You maybe iss craze—not me. You no talk sense, thass all." He opened the door.

Del was on the point of grabbing him by the collar and forcing an explanation from him, but he dropped the idea when old Judge Warren Hostler, the lawyer came in. The ex-judge looked at him sharply, nodded briefly and went on into the office, closing the door behind him.

Del went on out to the bar and had a drink, his mind wrestling with Juan's puzzling talk. He hadn't finished his drink when an elderly, short man in range garb approached him. The man had gray chin whiskers and hard little eyes, and he had a worn gun holster stuffed with a .45 that looked too big for a man his size.

He had a nervous, jerky voice, and he was angry. "So you had the guts to show up here, did you, Harper? I thought the big gun hand was satisfied to hide out and do his dirty work through his partner. Well, where's your gun?"

DEL SET his whiskey glass down on the bar without finishing. He saw the customers grouping at the far end of the bar, clearing the space around him and the old man, then he turned back to the speaker, and his own voice was low, under control.

"Why shouldn't I come back, Mr. Gainesville? This is—or was—my home range." He had known the high-tempered little old man in the years gone by, and respected him as a solid cowman.

"Why? You dare stick yore nose in here after all the thievery and high-jackin' you been doin' here; after yore lobos rode down my brother; after terrorizin' the whole county with your cattle-runnin' an' killin's?"

Del shook his head. "I haven't done anything like that. I'd heard that I was getting credit for—something like that, though."

"An' you didn't send me word by your partner, Mike Sorril, that if I didn't hire yore gang o' cutthroats to give me free passage through Pinetop Pass when I drive next week that you'd steal the whole herd this very night? You mean to stand there—"

"I mean I don't know what you're talking about, but I intend to find out. Suppose you start tellin' me—"

"I'll tell yuh, you hornery thievin' coyote, I'll tell yuh so it'll do the most good—"

The cocky old man had his gun half out when Del grabbed him.

For his age, he put up a good fight, but Del yanked the gun out of his hand just as the group of ranchers behind him scattered, with killing on their minds, intending to back up Gainesville's play.

Del swept Gainesville's gun over the group, watching their hands

until the last one dropped the weapon back in its pouch. This was the old gun-fighter, Harper, and his hand and eye still had their speed. He was surprised to note this, himself, but glad of it right now.

"Now it's my time to talk," he said, "and you're all going to listen. Sure, I went to prison for killing a man. Right or wrong, I went, and I stayed three years, and got out on parole. I've been in another county the last two years, and I don't know a thing about what's goin' on here. I've heard my name mentioned in connection with it, and that's one thing that brought me here. I'm going to find out what it is—and in the meantime you're not going to ride me down. That's the whole yarn. I haven't hurt you—but I will hurt the first man that tries to interfere with me. Now just stand hitched till I get out of here. Your gun will be out in the street, Gainesville."

He backed out of the saloon, covering the group that watched him with angry eyes. He threw Gainesville's gun into the dirt of the dark street and walked up toward the jail. He was lucky to find the marshal in his office, though it was late at night.

THE MARSHAL was a stranger to Del Harper, a broad-beamed old man with slow movements and a roundish face. Del Harper told him his name, and the man's eyes opened unbelievingly for a moment.

"I came here to come to an understanding with you," Del said. "I was sent to prison from here five years ago on the charge of manslaughter. I had a little homestead here, and was having trouble with a big rancher that wanted my water. There had been some gun trouble, and I'd been the fastest. Then one night in Contreras' saloon, a couple of gunnies thought they had me cornered and tried to kill me. They shot me, and I killed them, but one of my bullets killed the bartender, who wasn't in the fight. I was sent up for killing him. It was an accident, of course, but my enemy happened to have political pull, and I went to prison."

"You been out two years," the marshal said. "I've been hearing plenty—"

"Yes. I left prison, determined not even to carry a gun the rest of my life. I've been working on a ranch over in the next county, trying to decide whether to come back here or not. I wanted to come home, but I wanted to be sure I'd be able to settle down right and live in peace. Then I heard that my name was being connected with a lot of range deviltry around here—"

"You heard it?" the marshal repeated in surprise. "You mean to tell me you ain't been terrorizing the whole county through Mike Sorril and that gang of gunnies you and him has got holed up out at yore place? You tellin' me—"

"I'm tellin' you exactly that," Harper said, standing up. "You got any charges written down against me?"

"We—ll, no. Yuh see, my jurisdiction is just in town; it don't extend out in the country. But let me tell you somethin'; don't you start gallivantin' around in this town while I'm marshal. I won't stand for it one minute."

"Keep your pants on, marshal," Del told him. "I'm here to stop this terrorizing, not to keep it up. But there might be a little gallivanting before I get through. Now you say Sorril is holed up at my old place?"

"You ought to know," the marshal answered stiffly.

Del Harper turned and left the marshal's office, convinced that the man was reasonably honest, even if he didn't seem to have any too much sense. He walked down the street to where a light burned in the hardware store, and went in.

"Howdy, Mr. Story," he said to the old proprietor, "I want to buy me a gun and holster."

The man looked at him over steel-rimmed glasses, and his face hardened in disapproval. "Sorry," he said gruffly, "I ain't got any to sell."

Del's mouth tightened. "Mr. Story, did I ever do you any personal harm?" he asked.

"Why, no. I can't say that you did."

"You *will* be able to say it in a

minute, if you don't bring one of those guns out of that showcase, and wait on me for what I want. Let me see that .45."

He found and bought a new gun and belt, and stuffed it with shells, and threw a bill down on the counter. "Next time," he said, "Don't try mistreatin' people till they've mistreated you."

HE WENT out onto the street and headed toward his horse, which he had left tied in front of Juan Contreras' Saloon. As he was untying the animal, a man came out, opening the batwing doors wide enough for the light from the inside to shine on Del's face. The man let the doors swing inward and stepped out across the walk to the hitching rack.

"Harper?" he asked. "I'm Jude Porter. Remember?" He extended his hand.

Harper shook hands with him, and as he did he saw the Deputy Marshal's badge on Porter's vest.

Porter said: "I heard you was around, Harper. Y'know, it's kinda hard to believe what yuh hear."

"If you're talking about me taking Gainesville's gun away from him, it's right. If you're talking about the other stuff, it's wrong. You can take it or leave it, but I came here to break it up. And I think I know the answer already—or part of it."

Porter leaned back against the hitchrail and rolled a cigarette. He seemed friendly enough, although Harper had not known him any too well five years ago. He just remembered him as a dinky trader, swapping horses, saddles, handling stock auctions and the like until he had picked up a little shirt-tail sized ranch down on the river.

"Mike Sorril was yore partner before you—had your trouble, wasn't he?" Porter asked speculatively.

"No, though folks thought he was. He was workin' for me on my homestead on the shares because I didn't have the cash to pay him wages. When I was in jail, I gave him a power of attorney to take care of provin' up my homestead while I was away. But he wasn't what you'd call a partner."

"I ain't doubtin' yuh," Porter answered slowly, "but he tells it different. 'Course, you heard he's the ramrod o' them hellions on yore place, but his claim is that you've been directin' things from yore hideout, wherever it was. It's you the ranchers is blamin' most."

"Yeah," Del Harper answered dryly. "And that's why I'm goin' out to have a talk with this gent—right now, before the sun comes up again."

Porter smoked a moment in silence, the red tip of his cigarette glowing and dying alternately. Then he said, speculatively, to see how it would be taken; "I reckon you're just about standin' alone on this deal, but I'm kinda o' the notion to believe you. It's outside o' my territory as deputy marshal, but I'd like to ride along with you—just unofficial."

Del Harper gripped the horn of his saddle and his jaws tightened there in the darkness. He had been gone five years, and since his return a few hours ago, this was the first friendly word he had heard. And it had come from a comparative stranger, a man who had no particular reason to believe in him.

"I'd be mighty proud to have you along," he answered. "But I warn you, there might be a killin'—"

"Let's ride," Porter answered.

They were riding out of town when a new thought came to Del, and it left ashes in his mouth. "The Marshal wouldn't have sent you to ride herd on me, would he?"

Porter chuckled in the darkness. "What if he did? Marshal Stigler's a fair hombre, and he'd be just as interested in seein' you get a fair shake if this thing is like you say,

as he'd be interested in jailin' you if you was runnin' a windy. That's all you can ask, ain't it?"

2

THE BUILDINGS of his old homestead made a cluster of black shadows in the twilight of a quarter moon as Del stopped his horse before the front gate. A creaking windmill made a tall gaunt shadow back by the barn, and the cottonwoods overtopped the low house. To the left, scrub oak covered the ground from the yard fence clear down to the creek which ran a quarter of a mile away. Somewhere in the rear a horse whinnied, and in the small corral a calf bawled.

It was home, and in the darkness it looked restful to Del—but the quietness was somehow sinister. There was not a light showing as he slid off his animal without calling out to the house.

"I reckon, this bein' your personal business, I'll stay here," Porter suggested considerately. "But if yuh need me, yell."

"Thanks," Del answered shortly.

He dropped his reins to the ground and opened the front fence gate and walked up on the porch. The door was half open, and there was no light inside. He walked in, struck matches and explored the two rooms. There were dirty dishes on the kitchen table, the bed was unmade in the other room—and that was all.

He went out through the back, took two steps off the log step toward the bunkhouse—and met a bullet.

He spun as the bullet ripped across the back of his shoulders, and saw a yellow flash from the corner of the house as the gun roared the second time.

Del dropped to his hands and knees as he yanked his own gun and answered the fire. He shot three times, then stopped to listen. All he heard was the crackling of the brush, and then silence.

From the front three shots rang out, and Porter came racing around the house and was with Del, his gun in his hand.

"Get him?" the deputy asked. "You all right?"

"He got away. Just dusted my shoulder," Del answered angrily. "Nice welcome home, huh?"

"It all shapes up," Porter answered. "If you was running this shebang they probably wouldn't be meetin' you with lead. Want to look in the bunkhouse?"

They went to the bunkhouse and entered, Del coming in the front and Porter the rear door. It was dark and empty, with six unmade cots lined up along one side of the room. Del lit a lamp. The place had been recently occupied, but nobody was around.

While Del looked around, Porter broke his weapon open and refilled the cylinder with five new shells, leaving one chamber empty for the firing pin to rest on. Del reloaded, gave a final look around, and blew out the light.

"Where does Mike Sorril hang out when he's in town?" he asked.

"At his saloon. Oh, I guess you hadn't heard about it. He's bought out Blocker's saloon. Blocker runs it, but Mike has got quarters in the back, where he hangs out when he's in town. Doin' all right for himself, Mike is."

"Yeah," Del answered dryly. "He seems to be."

Porter did not comment as they got their horses and rode back to town. Del had plenty of time to think, and as he rode, the picture began to fit itself together.

DEL HARPER had been young and ambitious when he settled on his homestead, and he had plenty of confidence in himself, too much, he admitted now.

He had settled on the best water in the country, and fenced it, which he had a right to do. But Bart Ringland had other ideas. Old Ringland was a hard-case rancher of the old school, and he could not adjust himself to seeing fenced range. And powerful as he was, he did not take Del Porter seriously. He merely in-

formed him that he would have to get those fences down or have them cut down.

Being right, Del got his back up in a hurry, and exercised his trigger finger too freely. He killed three Ringland riders who got on his place, and Ringland decided to get rid of the kid in a hurry. He put two of his gunnies on Del's trail. Del got them too, in Contreras' saloon, but he accidentally killed the bartender. Ringland now had him over a barrel, and he had the political pull to force a trial on him and send him to prison. Then Ringland had cut the fences.

What had gone on since then, Del didn't know. Ringland had died shortly after, and others had taken over in his stead. But word had come to him through friends that he was reputed to be the head of a gang terrorizing the county, and his former reputation as a quick-tempered trigger-hungry rannie who had threatened to get out of prison and make Ringland pay for his trouble had made the story more believable. Most men believed it.

Mike Sorril, who had worked with him, was supposed to be his lieutenant, who ran the deal while Del stayed safely in another county, directing their deviltry. It was Mike Sorril that Del wanted to get his hands on now.

As they rode back into town, Porter said: "I'm an officer back here in town, so I'd better not side along with you. But watch out for yourself. Sorril must know you're gunnin' for him by now, and he'll be layin' for you."

"Thanks," Del answered. "I can take care of myself."

He left Porter and rode to the home of Judge Hostler where there was a light in the window. The ex-judge invited him into his living room, not cordially, but with reserve.

"What can I do for you?" he asked. The former judge was a stooped old man who looked over the rims of his glasses when he talked.

Del told him who he was. He said, "You sent me to prison five years ago for manslaughter. When you pronounced sentence, you intimated that you didn't think that I was entirely to blame, but the jury had convicted me. I understand that you also recommended my parole."

"Yes," the judge responded. "But since then, I'm not entirely convinced that I was right."

"I know what you mean," Del said, "and that's why I'm here. I wanted to ask you some questions. A man that claims to be my partner seems to be living on my place and causing the trouble, claiming he's doing it under my orders, which is not so. About my place first: would you know if it was still in my name?"

"Yes, Sorril proved it up for you under your power of attorney: but incidentally it is mortgaged, I believe, to a man named Porter."

"Jude Porter, huh?"

"Yes. Porter buys and sells ranches, and lends money occasionally. And as to you being responsible for the deviltry that Sorril is up to; I'm frank to say that I believed you were back of it for a while. I have been investigating the whole matter, though, for a group of ranchers who were trying to make a case against you; and it struck me as queer that with all the talk about you being the man back of it, I could not find a bit of proof that you actually were. I'm inclined now to believe that Sorril, knowing your reputation as a dangerous man, has been using it as a cover for his own activities. But, of course, I don't know."

Del got up. "Thanks, judge. It's good to hear somebody say that for a change. I suppose I'm legally entitled to take charge of my ranch, then?"

"So far as I know you are. I don't know how much is owing to Porter, since the amount of the recorded mortgage is hidden behind the usual legal phrase, *'One dollar and other valuable consideration.'* But unless and until Porter forecloses on it, the property is yours."

"Thanks."

DEL LEFT the judge's and went down the street toward Blocker's saloon, convinced now that he knew enough about what was behind this trouble to clear it up—if he could set his hands on Mike Sorril.

He went into Blocker's. "Is Mike Sorril around?" he asked the bartender.

The bartender was a stranger, but he must have recognized Del by reputation. "Yeah. He's back in his office. Go through that door there."

Del went through a doorway that opened onto a narrow hall, lined with rooms. At the rear there was a door marked, "Office", and he turned the knob and went in.

Mike Sorril was a short, heavy shouldered man with crisp black hair. He sat at his desk, his head resting on a pile of papers—as though he were asleep.

The long handle of a Spanish dagger protruded from the middle of his back. Mike Sorril was dead.

Del Harper stood and looked at the man for a long moment. He went over and felt of his pulse and there was no sign of heartbeat, though the body was still warm. A soft breeze came in the open window at his back and slightly ruffled his hair, but there was no other movement in the room.

Del stood still, his thumbs in his belt, and the full meaning of this death came to him and left him chilled. Mike Sorril might have been the figurehead in the trouble, but somebody was back of him, somebody who wanted to make sure that Del Harper didn't force the whole truth out of Mike Sorril.

But Del had little time now to speculate on that angle, for the situation presented a still more serious problem. He was known to be gunning for Mike Sorril, and the bartender had directed him back to Mike's office, apparently not knowing that Mike was dead. Even though Mike was reputed to be a crook, all the evidence pointed to the fact that Del had come in and knifed him. And Marshal Stigler had already cautioned him about making trouble within the limits of the town. And, the ranchers would be convinced that this was a killing resulting from trouble within the bunch of renegades, added proof in their minds that Harper was the guilty party.

Del Harper paused only a moment, then lifted the dead man's hand and took the papers from the desk and stuffed them into his hip pocket.

Knowing he was in hot water anyway, he decided that the most important thing for him was to gain time. And the longer it was before the matter was discovered, the better it was for him.

He tossed a leg over the office window and went out into the darkness of the alley back of the saloon, and made his way back to Juan Contreras office.

"Juan," he said. "I want to borrow one of your rooms a few minutes."

Contreras shrugged in an unfriendly manner. "They're for rent. A dollar a night."

DEL WENT into one of the rooms and lighted an oil lamp, and by its dim light he studied the stack of papers he had taken from Sorril's desk. The only sound he made was an occasional oath that slipped from him. After an hour he stuffed the papers into his hip pocket again, and came out. Contreras was just going into his office.

"Juan," he said. "Did you know that Mike Sorril was dead?" He watched the Mexican's face closely.

Contreras opened his eyes a moment, then shrugged. "I am not sorry," he said. "It should have happened before."

"Yeah," Del answered dryly. "And with him dead, you won't have to pay anybody to let you operate your saloon, will you?"

"*Quien sabe?* Who knows?" Juan answered. "He was not the only one—"

"Who do you think killed him?" Del asked suddenly.

Contreras shrugged. "How should I know? Me, I do not like trouble."

The Mexican glanced anxiously up the hall toward the saloon room. There was something about his actions that made Del suspicious. It was as though Contreras was waiting for something, expecting someone."

Then it dawned on him what it might be. "Do you think the marshal might be looking for me?" he asked.

"How should I know?"

"You might have sent word to him—I see. Thanks." He had seen in the look on the Mexican's face that he had called the turn. "I don't believe I'll wait for him," he snapped. "But I'll be seeing you again. I want to have a talk with you—when I've got more time."

He bolted out the back door—and ran squarely into Jude Porter.

"Harper," Porter said in a husky whisper. "I'm glad I found you in time."

"Yes?" Harper asked. "What did you want?"

"Stigler's getting a posse together to find you. The bartender at Blocker's found Sorril's body and reported the killing. Stigler sent me out to look for you. I found your horse tied in front of Judge Hostler's, and knew you were still around, so I brought your animal back here and hid him in the alley. You can get away clear if you'll light a shuck out right now. Otherwise—well, I've got to join Stigler and the crowd."

"I see," Harper answered. "Well, thanks."

"If you'd take my advice," Porter offered, "I'd head back where you came from and give this thing time to blow over before you came back to straighten things out. I reckon you had a right to kill Sorril, but this range is pretty sore at you—"

"I know," Harper answered. "And thanks for bringing my horse. I'll be getting along."

"Good luck," Porter said. "And you'd better *vamos*."

Del Harper found his horse and headed him out of town. Behind him, he heard a shout as somebody must have recognized him. In a moment there was a clattering of hooves along the single street, and more than a dozen men were in pursuit of him.

3

DEL HARPER headed his animal toward his own ranch, with the posse in hot pursuit. He spurred his horse through the darkness until he reached a piece of unfenced open prairie, where he turned off the hard-packed trail and rode on the grass, thus muffling the sound of his animal's feet to some extent. The thudding hooves of the pursuing horses still beat malignantly in his ears.

He came at last to a creek lined on both sides with woods, and here he stopped his horse in the greater darkness of the trees and waited. The sound of the posse came beating closer and closer to him while he held his horse's nose to keep him from whinnying. The posse came on—then passed him at a hard run. He knew that death had ridden very near to him.

But he knew, or thought he knew, the answer to his problem. He knew, or thought he knew who the guilty man was. But proving it was another thing, for he would not be believed if he offered only the filmy evidence and supposition that he had in his defense. He had to catch the man red handed. And he could only do this if the man had acted as Del suspected that he might act under the circumstances.

Hoping his hunch was right, he turned his animal back into the road and headed for the ranch of old Mr. Gainesville. It was a good hour's ride, but as he rode up he saw a light in the house. He did not call out, for Gainesville would likely have shot him, but walked in, and with his hand close to his gun.

Gainesville was in—trying to wrap up a wound in his left arm with his right hand. The old man looked at Del with bulging eyes, then looked at his own gun hanging in its holster on the bed post, then sputtered

angrily. "All right, git it over with, you drygulchin', thievin' coyote."

Del almost smiled at the ringy old man. "I kinda got an idea you was shot while tryin' to protect some of your cattle, Mr. Gainesville. That right?"

"You ought to know," Gainesville snapped. "And if I had my gun—"

"But you ain't got it, so you've got to listen to me this time," Del answered. "I told you at first it wasn't me stealin' stuff around here. Now I got an idea of who it is, but I've got to catch 'em in the act. What happened?"

Gainesville turned around and leaned his back against his dresser, his eyes snapping, but studying Harper more closely. "I reckon you wasn't in the bunch, or you wouldn't be back here now, come to think of it. But you—"

"No I didn't engineer it, either," Del snapped. "Where'd it happen, and how long ago, and which way did they go, if you know?"

The old man wasn't to be stampeded. He was reasoning it out for himself. "If you'd knowed what had happened, you wouldn't have come in on me like this, for fear I might have shot you. You wouldn't have to ask them questions. You know maybe I been misjudgin' you—"

"Sure you have," Del said. "But I ain't got time to go into that. I want to get my hands on them men—"

"So do I," old Gainesville said. "Come on, I'll tell you while we ride."

"You're hurt—"

"That ain't stoppin' me," Gainesville snapped. "Just tie this rag on my arm, will you? I ain't no good left-handed."

AS THEY rode out to Gainesville's back pasture, Gainesville took up his story. "I figgered that with things comin' to a head like they was in town, you'd probably make a big play tonight. I 'lowed all the time that the message you was supposed to have sent me about stealin' my stuff next week was to throw me off so's I wouldn't be lookin' for you to touch it this week."

"Looks like you figgered it out right," Del admitted. "Except who done it."

"So me and Jack Ames, we went and laid out in a bois d'arc patch down in this pasture where I was keepin' my pedigreed she stuff. They came—four men of 'em. Me and Jack jumped 'em—but they got Jack, shot my horse and shot me in the arm. I had to walk all the ways back to the ranch, and that was why I was there when you come. I was gonna set out to foller 'em, because I got a good idea where they're drivin' 'em."

"Good. Where's that?" Del asked.

"I'm takin' you to the place. It's a little box canyon back in the hills, where one or two men with guns could hold off a whole army. It's hard ridin', but I'm sure they're headed there."

They rode on through broken ground, picking up the trail of the stolen cattle at the pasture, passing through the fence which had been cut, and then along a dry creek bed which led gradually upward into the stony, pine-covered hills.

The old man was silent for a mile or so, then he asked suddenly, "Young feller, if you heard you was gettin' credit for all this deviltry, and yet you was doin' all right somewhere else, why in tarnation did you come back and stick yore nose into it like you're doin'?"

"I couldn't help it," Del Harper said simply. "I had to come."

"Nobody don't have to do nothin' he don't want to do," Gainesville said.

"I disagree with you," Del laughed dryly. "I had to spend three years in the pen. I didn't want to do that—but I'm glad now that I did."

"Glad you went to the pen?" Gainesville repeated unbelievingly.

"Yep. I learned something there I probably couldn't have learned anywhere else."

"I never heard of anybody learnin' anything except more meanness in the pen."

"That's what I was starting to learn," Del admitted. "I was sore at the world for the break I got. I didn't think I should have been sent

there for what was an accident. But one day, I learned different."

"How was that?"

DEL'S VOICE dropped. "That prison was a tough place. They had me workin' in a rock quarry. It was hard and dangerous, and the guards were plain dirt mean. I hated them and the whole world. And then the rocks fell on me. I was buried under a cave-in of rock for thirty-six hours while they were digging me out—and I didn't think they were going to get to me in time. I spent these thirty-six hours thinkin' like I never thought before."

"I reckon that would make a man think," Gainesville admitted.

"It did. I thought I was going to die, and I was living my life over, like they say a drowning man does. I saw where I had been so hot-headed and cocky that I thought I didn't owe my neighbors or anybody anything. I had figgered I was pretty good, and that I didn't need friends. Well, sir, lyin' there under all that rock, I saw what a mistake it was. There I was waitin' to die, and I didn't have a friend in the world. Not even another prisoner cared whether I lived or died—and they was right; I hadn't been a friend to them, and they didn't owe me anything.

"But even though they didn't give a hoot about me, they was workin' to save my life, and that made me realize that a man can't get very far no matter how good he thinks he is if he ain't got friends that will help him when he needs help, because sooner or later he's gonna need it, no matter how independent he is. It's a mighty lonesome, useless life without friends, I discovered right then."

"We—ll," Gainesville drawled, "I reckon you're right. Maybe I ain't give enough thought to that myself. So, you kinda changed your ways, eh?"

"I changed overnight," Del admitted simply. "I didn't go around advertisin' it, but I knew right then that there was only one thing I could do to give me any satisfaction in living. That was to come home and start over, right where I made my mistakes. I waited two years, tryin' to make sure that I could come back here and fight to hold my head up among my neighbors. Then when I was sure—I walk into this. Well, I ain't runnin' from it. I'm here for the purpose of getting right with my former neighbors, and I'm gonna do it—unless that posse kills me."

"What posse?" Gainesville asked in surprise.

"Sorril was killed in town, and the folks there seem to think I did it. They're after me, but I sure want to get this other business cleaned up before I face 'em."

"You mean you'd go back and face 'em?"

"How else could I live in peace here? I'm either goin' to do it—or die tryin'. Nothin' else will do."

4

THEY RODE for a while before Mr. Gainesville spoke again. Then he said. "I don't reckon you've told many people what you just told me, but I'm mighty proud you did. It ain't every young feller learns that much so soon. But the point I want to make is that, after what Judge Hostler thinks, I'm willin' to believe you. And I'm one of the men that hired the judge to get evidence to revoke yore parole. I reckon I'll admit I was mistaken if you can show me who *is* back of this range trouble."

"Thanks," Del answered. "I'll sure be needin' folks to believe me."

Mr. Gainesville pulled up his horse. "We'd better go afoot from here,"

he advised. "There's a narrow cut through a hill here where they could have got the stock through. One of their men could hold off a army anywhere in it, and we got to surprise him if they're here and got it guarded."

They dismounted and tied their horses in a clump of blackjack, then went ahead on foot until they were within a short distance of the cut.

"If they've got a guard," Mr. Gainesville said in a whisper, "he'll be waitin' here at the mouth of the pass. If there was any way we could slip up on him—"

"I'll try it," Del answered. "You wait here ten minutes for me to get set, then you make a little noise back here. That'll get his attention—then I'll take care of him."

"Good idea," the old man agreed. "But don't you get yourself hurt, and don't use your gun, because it'll just warn those inside."

Del Harper went forward slowly, careful not to make a sound as he threaded around rocks and through underbrush, following the trail upward. Finally he came to the point where, stopping, he could see the darker mass of rock on either side of a cut. He paused here and listened.

He heard a cough in the dark not far ahead of him, but could not spot its location exactly. Still, it gave him knowledge that the place was occupied, and that he could get closer to the man guarding the pass.

And it gave him something far beyond that; the first real hope that he could prove his case. For it was certain now that he was coming upon those who had used his reputation as a bad man for their own ends, and whose very existence kept a hangnoose dangling over his own head.

He crawled closer toward the mouth of the cut, now on hands and knees, and keeping well in the darkness of the brush along the trail. His breath was coming in short gasps now, not from fatigue, but from that inner excitement at coming so near to the end of his long trail.

Then back of him he heard a slight noise; that of a horse pushing against heavy brush, and Gainesville's low voice saying; "Whoa, there."

Instantly there was a scraping of booted feet within half a dozen paces of Del Harper, as the guard scrambled to his feet and came a few steps down the trail.

Del made out the form of the moving man, now a dozen feet from him, now six, then almost within arm's reach. Del's fist gripped the barrel of his pistol.

THEN HE sprang. His gun whipped through the dark and slashed the man across the forehead just under the brim of his hat. The man grunted as his hat fell off and his knees buckled under him.

Del followed him to the ground, his hands groping for the man's mouth. But the man was out cold, beyond shouting or resistance, and lay limp. It took Del less than three minutes to tie his wrists with the man's neckerchief and gag him with his own. He ripped the man's belt out of the loops of his levis and bound his ankles together and then to his wrists behind him.

He took the man's gun, then made his way back down the trail to Mr. Gainesville.

"The door is open," he said. "If you'd rather wait here, I'll go in—"

"I told you I was with you," the cocky little man snapped. "And that means all the way—"

"I'm sorry," Del grinned in the dark. "Ready?"

They got through the two hundred yards of the pass without opposition, and came out into an open saucer of a quarter of a mile in diameter, which was floored with lush grass knee high, and through which ran a small hill stream. Down the trail through the grass they made out the yellow square of a lighted window.

"This is a nice setup," Harper observed, "for the kind of business they're doing."

"Yeah," Mr. Gainesville answered. "And hard to crack. There's a trail out of the other side, so they can come through, hold off anybody follow'n' 'em, and be clean out of the

country if anybody chasin' 'em had to go around the hills."

"I'll call on the gents," Del said as they approached the house. "I kinda got a special reason to meet 'em."

"What about my cows?" Gainesville argued. "I got me a crow to pick with 'em, too."

"You've had one crack at 'em tonight, and I haven't," Del answered. "I'm going into that house myself, first. You head 'em off if there's a back door."

They were within fifty feet of the house, and here they separated, the old man going toward the rear. Del started straight to the entrance.

But he did not reach the door. In one moment he saw the glow of a cigarette outside the door, and the smoker heard him and shouted.

Del did not wait, but fired directly at the man, running toward him at the same moment. The man yelled and knocked the door open, falling inside. The door slammed. Del kept running toward it.

He heard the back door open, heard Gainesville's gun and another in an exchange of shots, then the house erupted cursing men and gunfire. Del Harper felt an exultant eagerness as he crouched and returned the fire of the three men who came pouring out of the lighted shack.

The next few moments were livid with the blaze of battle. Del Harper knew that he had been hit, and yet he felt no pain. That thing which was within him, driving him on toward his objective was too strong to be held back by the blow of a .45 slug, and he went steadily forward, crouching, into the gunfire.

He saw one man go down, went down to his own knees when another slug hit him, was on his feet again and going forward step by single step toward the cabin when the second man fell and was out of the fight.

The third one ran backward and ducked into the cabin door—and it was this man that Del Harper recognized by the lamp's dim light as he retreated and tried to slam the door on Del. Harper kicked the door open and followed him in—and stood face to face with Jude Porter.

THEY LOOKED at each other for one fraction of a moment, Porter's face a savage snarl, Harper's bloody visage twisted into contempt. Porter had pouched his weapon.

"Get it out, Porter, or I'll shoot you down like a dog. I knew it was you when I finally remembered your coming to help me back at my ranch. You slipped around to the back of the house and fired two shots at me in the dark, then ran back to the front. You came running back around and fired three shots at what was supposed to be the bushwhacker. But —and I didn't think of it at the time —when we both reloaded in the bunkhouse, you ejected and replaced *five* empty shells in your gun, the two you fired at me and the three you were supposed to have fired at the ambusher. *You* were the ambusher."

"That don't prove nothin'. I could have killed you later—"

"I figgered that out, too. You knew I was gunning for Sorril, and you intended to kill me to keep me from getting the truth out of him. But when I didn't find him, you knew he was back in town where you could get him. You decided it would be better for your purposes to have Sorril dead and me alive, but blamed for Sorril's death. As long as I was alive but hiding out, you could keep up your deviltry and blame me. But with me and Sorril both dead, folks would start looking for the *real* culprit.

"So—you went back to town with me and killed Sorril before I could get my hands on him. He was supposed to be running the gang of thieves, but everything he had was mortgaged to you. He was just a dummy for you. You got away with it by holding the deputy marshal's job, so your own victims would be coming to you for help, and you could steer them in the wrong direction. And in the marshal's office, you could keep tabs on me through the parole board. You decided to pull this job tonight while I was here to make it look as though I'd taken charge of my gang personally. Porter, I'm going to shoot you down like a dog if you don't draw—"

"No you're not," Porter said brazenly. "You can't shoot a man down that won't draw his gun. I know all about you turnin' over a new leaf. Learned it from the warden. Harper, go on and shoot me if you can. I won't draw."

Harper felt a burning rage sweep over him, and he knew frustration, for Porter was right. He could not shoot down a man who wouldn't shoot back. He was desperate.

"Do you think that after what you've done I won't shoot you down?" he gritted. "That business of me reforming was just to make it easier on me. It got me a parole didn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Then, hombre, I'm going to prove to you that I can still hit what I shoot at. You can draw or not, but I'm going to blow your brains out, and *right now—*"

"No!" Porter screamed. "Don't shoot, Harper. Sure, I used your name to scare hell out of the ranchers around here, but I'll make it up to you. I'll sign over all I made out of the deal if you'll let me skip out. I made plenty, and it's all yours. I got every transaction down in a notebook buried right here under this shack—"

"You slinking coyote," Harper answered. "I won't shoot you if you'll dig up that stuff, but if you make one crooked move—"

Porter did make a crooked move. Mr. Gainesville was coming in the rear door, and as Del Harper heard him and turned his head, Porter's hand flashed to his weapon and came up spouting lead.

But Harper's gun was spouting lead, too, and sooner by a fraction of a second. Porter caught a slug which whipped him around and knocked him down with a mule kick that left him unconscious before he hit the floor.

"I thought you'd try that," Harper said, looking at the still man on the floor. "I had to turn my back to make you draw, but you did it."

Old Mr. Gainesville looked at the deputy on the floor, then said, "Yep. Just like he was dirty-dealin' all his friends behind their backs. I heard every word he said. It sure was a surprise to me, but when I testify at the trial, and with the proof he says he has hid under our feet, I reckon we all owe it to you to see that you get a right good welcome home, Harper. And I want to be the first to apologize and call you friend."

Del grinned and took the proffered hand. He knew the ringy old man would be quarreling with him within a week, but that was the way some neighbors were. But they still remained friends and neighbors, because they knew the thing that Del Harper had paid so much to learn—that neighbors need each other.

THE END

★ HONOR CODE ★

by Paul ChadWick

To Wes Clune, the lawman's star represented a trust ,and the lawman's guns were to be used with mercy as well as justice.

WES CLUNE had never seen a man brained by bullets. He had heard of it being done, but he'd never seen it. Now it was happening right in front of his eyes and the sight made him feel sick inside, tying his stomach into knots.

Darrel Skelton, sheriff of Parson Creek, went on blasting away with his big Peacemaker even after Buddy Herd, the owlhooter, fell off the wagon box to the ground beside the wheel.

The top of Herd's head literally disappeared under that slashing storm of lead. It was too late to stop it or to do anything about it. Skelton had begun shooting the moment Herd had shown himself between the canvas drawn curtains in the back of the old Conestoga wagon. Clune turned his eyes away for a second and felt his throat contract.

When the thunder of Skelton's Colt finally stopped and there was a strained silence—strained for Clune at least—Skelton calmly broke open his gun, blew the smoke from its long barrel and casually reloaded.

There was a self-satisfied expression in his muddy eyes as he shoved the weapon back into leather. A big, dish-faced man, he had been a special marshal in a half dozen tough cowtowns before getting himself elected sheriff of Parson Creek. He had done that by overawing a certain element among the voters. They hadn't known, any more than Clune had known, that in every town where he'd served before as peace officer the citizens had finally rebelled at his high-handed ways and forced him to quit.

Clune found his voice with difficulty. "No call to have done that, Skelton!"

"That so? Why not?"

"Maybe Herd was with the bunch that held up the Cheyenne stage like some of the passengers said," Clune muttered. "But he wasn't even heeled when you shot him. He was going to give himself up. There wasn't any call to keep on gunning him either."

Skelton opened his puffy lids and fixed his hard gaze on Wes Clune's face. Clune was still pale with anger and revulsion.

"You don't like the way I handle things, eh, younker? That it?"

"Sort of."

"Too bad. But I don't take any chances with hardcase snakes, see! I shoot first an' find out what I want to know after when I deal with gents like Herd."

"He was only a kid," said Clune.

He reached down with tense fingers, unpinned the deputy's badge on his shirt and tossed it at Skelton. It fell at the lawman's feet and lay gleaming in the grass, a small bright star.

"So long, sheriff," he said. "I'm not so trigger-itchy myself that I wouldn't give a man a chance to talk before I gunned him. And after I knew he was dead I'd leave him alone. I'm not your deputy any more."

"Pick it up, Clune!" said Skelton, pointing to the badge.

"What's the matter with your own arm, sheriff?"

"Pick it up," repeated Skelton thickly. His fat fingers clenched into fists as he looked at Clune. He was taller than Clune and fifty pounds heavier.

Skeleton came into sight, fanning bullets at Clune desperately.

Clune stared back coldly, the uncertainty of a moment ago gone now. The retching sensation in his stomach had quieted and his mouth and eyes were bleak.

Seeing him like that, Skelton seemed to remember that Clune was the son of a fighting sheriff and the grandson of another sheriff who had brought gun justice to Wyoming with the first wagon train of settlers.

He reached down, picked up the deputy's badge himself and pocketed it, his face mottled with suppressed rage. "I was dumb to ask you to help me," he drawled. "I shoulda recollected that your dad was one of those hurrahin'. psalm-singin', honor-bright badge-toters who don't like the smell of powder so much as they do the shine on their boots."

Clune glanced down at his own feet and flushed. It was a tradition in the Clune family to keep boots, saddles and guns well greased. "Good boots an' a good gun make a man," old Seth Clune had said, "along with the right stuff on top of a good saddle."

Clune remembered that, but Skel-

ton's sneering words got under his skin just the same. It was partly because he was sensitive over the fact that the folks in Parson Creek thought him too young to be their sheriff.

"You ought to be thankin' me for givin' you a chance to play lawman," said Skelton pointedly, "'stead of tryin' to tell me how to run my office."

Clune was silent, reproaching himself. He should have had savvy enough, he thought, never to have allowed Skelton to deputize him. It was some little quirk of vanity in him, some romantic impulse connected with the memory of his dad and granddad that had made him accept. Now he'd learned his lesson.

He turned toward his bronc, his oiled boots flashing in the sun.

"Don't go shootin' off your mouth, younker," Darrel Skelton warned him. Clune whirled with one foot in the stirrup, his face convulsed. "I'll say what kind of lawman I think you are, Skelton."

"Yeah? Then remember this. You ran out on me! If there's any listenin' done, kid, it'll be to me."

Clune didn't answer. He swung up into the saddle and headed back for Parson Creek, leaving Skelton to take care of Herd's body. He was fed up with the law and lawmen, he told himself—fed up with cold-blooded killing. It even pained him to think of his dad and granddad. He had washed his hands of all of them.

WITH THE arrival of Skelton back in town, though; with Skelton's boast of gun prowess spreading from lip to lip, and with Buddy Herd's battered body as seeming proof, a bombshell exploded under Wes Clune's feet.

It was a bombshell figuratively speaking. Actually it was the hysterical movement of a girl's slender hands—hands backed by burning anger and speechless hurt.

The anger was so real, the hurt so deep, that Clune submitted to them both in silent wonder.

He stood at the end of the Rincon Bar near the door of the small back stage while Patsy Pierce struck him. He stood where he had stood a dozen times before during the past two weeks, hungry of heart while she came down the little stairs and through the faded velvet curtain to meet him. He stood trembling and shy as always because his feelings for this girl, a comparative stranger about whose past he knew nothing, had crowded their way into his spirit till his natural self-possession was gone.

He had first known Patsy as a singer, one of Belle Wilson's girls; a darkly beautiful, wistful little thing whose only connection with Parson Creek in the short while she had been there was her voice and what it did to the hearts of the people who heard her. When she opened her red lips, arched her white neck and swayed her slender body, punchers, freighters and leathery-handed miners forgot their beers.

So did Wes Clune. He had listened to her singing, talked to her, looked deeply into her eyes. Something had blossomed between them, building up quickly to breathless heights of mutual regard. A dark-haired, grave-faced boy in love with a dark-haired, grave-faced girl.

And now suddenly, in a moment that would forever remain like a ghastly nightmare in Wes Clune's mind, all that regard was gone. On her part at least. In its place was this flaming anger, this tear-stained hurt, these striking, clawing hands.

She came down the stairway in the quiet that they had grown to think of as theirs before the first drinkers, gamblers and revelers came in. She hurled herself straight at Wes Clune like a fury. Not into his arms, but against the puzzled, pleading wonder in his face.

She scratched him, kicked him, beat finally with her doubled-up fists against his chest. He made an instinctive move to restrain her, then dropped his arms. He knew real emotion when he saw it. This was no play-acting. Whatever the anger and hurt were, whatever lay behind them, there was something so gen-

uine in Patsy's feelings that he respected them.

At the end, just before she left with her small face convulsed, her cheeks running wet, she flung him a single bitter clue to the mystery of her actions. "Murderer!" she said.

She gave him no time to ask her questions. She vanished behind the curtain, up the stairs again, leaving Clune to cope with his smarting, burning face and the shock inside him as best he could.

He hardly heard the casual, man-to-man counsel that old Smith, the bartender, handed out to him gratis along with a drink on the house.

"You're lucky, young feller," Smith said soothingly. "Maybe you won't have to say 'I will' now. Maybe you kin stay a batch like me. All wimmen is poison, but the good-lookin' dames is the worst."

BELLE WILSON had a different notion, a different version. Clune had to know something. He went straight to Belle's private office where she received him, queenly, bland and good-natured, hiding her hard worldly wisdom and tolerance of all human foibles behind a powdered blond face as innocent looking as a baby's.

She patted the white knuckles of Wes Clune's hand as he gripped her desk edge. Her voice was kindly but mocking. "It pays to know what the other man's hand is before you make your bet, honey."

"What's gambling got to do with Patsy Pierce, Miss Wilson?"

"Call me Belle, Wes. Miss Wilson sounds too formal; my dead husbands wouldn't like it." She wrinkled her nose at him. "You look like something the cat brought in. Pardon me if I laugh."

"There's nothing to laugh at," said Clune tensely. "Patsy and I are in love."

"*Were,* you mean, honey. She's not going to have any sentimental feelings left for the man who helped gun down her brother."

"Her brother!"

"That's what I said, honey—her brother. Herd's her real name; Pierce is only the moniker she uses in her singing. And she didn't come to Parson Creek two weeks ago just to warble for me. She took her hair down right off and told me her story because she knew I had a great big heart. Her kid brother, Buddy, was hiding out near here. She'd heard from him; she wanted to help him. She didn't think he was really guilty of the hold-up. You should have told her, honey, that you were going to be Skelton's deputy and go after Herd."

Wes Clune's eyes got sick. The whiteness of his knuckles faded as his hands went limp.

"Why didn't you, Wes, honey?" Belle Wilson asked softly.

"I didn't want anybody to know. Skelton asked me in private and I kept it that way."

"Why?"

"I don't like Skelton, don't cotton to his kind of lawman. I was sort of ashamed of being with him. But then I kept thinking of my dad—how he'd been a badge-toter, too—and how folks in this town have never given me a chance to wear a star."

Belle Wilson patted his hand again in motherly fashion, then patted her gleaming blonde hair. "I understand, Wes—even if Patsy Herd wouldn't. The old call was there. You felt it—like when the boys are whooping it up on a Saturday night and I gotta dance and sing and drink along with 'em. That's my trade, honey. I like it. Being a lawman is yours. But the cards just didn't break right for you. You didn't know; you didn't have any mirror in the ceiling to look at and see the hand against you. Buddy Herd put up a fight and you had to kill him."

"No!" said Clune. "No—that wasn't it, Belle."

"Skelton's telling it like that, honey."

"Skelton's lying. Herd was murdered."

Belle Wilson drew back and powdered her face nervously. "You're too honest, honey; it ain't the way to get along with women. You better just forget about Patsy."

"You don't think *I* murdered him." Clune burst out. "I didn't even draw my gun. Skelton just stood there and gunned him down like a dog—shot his brains out—when Herd was going to give up."

"Patsy won't believe that," Belle Wilson told him. "You were Skelton's deputy; you were with him."

"I resigned. I even threw my star at him."

"She won't believe that, either."

"Then there's no chance with her?"

"None, honey," said Belle Wilson.

BUT A VOICE sounded outside Wes Clune's door two hours later—Patsy Herd's voice.

"Let me in, Wes."

Clune clambered off the cheap frame cot in the Widow Keller's house where he was a boarder. He could hear Mrs. Keller talking, too, somewhere in the background, but it was Patsy's voice that stirred him. There was a note of urgency in it.

She came in quickly, but stood uncertainly, and Wes Clune was uncertain, too. His eyes searched hers, wonder on his face. Patsy stared back at him. "I've been hearing things, Wes," she said. "I came to find out if they were true."

"What sort of things?"

"Skelton says now you didn't shoot Buddy."

"I didn't."

"He says you got cold feet and ran out on him even before the shooting started. He says you can't stand the smell of powder."

There was no accusation in her words, no condemnation, only inquiry.

Wes Clune felt like laughing out loud. Skelton's lies, his boastful, malicious lies, distorting the truth to build up his own reputation as a gunman were helping Clune now—helping him with Patsy. He walked over to her and took hold of her hands gently.

She didn't withdraw them and she didn't respond, but still she let her fingers lie in his while her eyes searched his face. "You didn't know he was my brother, did you, Wes?"

"No, Patsy."

"And you didn't even fire one bullet at him?"

Clune shook his head.

"There was no need for anybody to do that," he said. "He was going to give himself up when Skelton killed him."

A spasm of grief shook her slim body.

"He was there when the stage was held up, Wes. But he didn't know until the last what kind of men he had thrown in with or what their real purpose was."

"You talked to him about it, Patsy?"

"No." She got a letter out of her dress, spread it open and held it out for Clune to read.

There on the crumpled page in a youthful scrawl was a confession such as only a confused and inexperienced amateur owlhooter could have written. Buddy Herd told his sister how he had got in with a wild crowd and regretted it, how he had taken part in a hold-up, then gone off by himself with no share of the spoils, but with a determination to give himself up to the law if need be, take his medicine like a man and go straight afterwards.

"Skelton never gave him the chance," said Clune bitterly. He gripped Patsy's wrist. "Skelton's lying, of course, because he's afraid of what I'll say. I didn't turn in my badge before the fight; there wasn't any fight. He shot Buddy before I could stop him. I tossed my star at his feet to show what I thought of him. You believe that, don't you, Patsy?"

"I think so," she said. "I want to believe it, Wes. And when you want to believe something with all your heart you generally can."

He squeezed her hand again, then dropped it quickly. He'd let it go at that for now. It would take time for Patsy's wish to believe to settle into conviction.

"Can I have the letter," he said, "for just a few hours?"

"Yes, Wes, of course."

When her footsteps had faded on the stairs Clune walked over and buckled on his gunbelt.

DARREL Skelton was by himself, having a drink in a bar at the outskirts of town when Clune joined him. For all his boasting and for all the votes that had put him in office Skelton had few real friends. He turned and looked at Clune sneeringly, his muddy eyes falling again on Clune's shiny boots.

"Well, younker!"

Clune held Buddy Herd's letter open for Skelton to read.

"Look at this, Skelton."

Frowning, picking the words out slowly with lips as well as eyes, Skelton read the simple confession of the man he had killed and his sneer deepened.

"So what?" he said.

Clune drew the letter away and put it back in his shirt before he answered.

"So he had a right to his chance to go straight, Skelton. Maybe you see it now and maybe you don't."

"I don't see nothing," said Skelton heavily, "except that Herd was guilty —guilty as hell. He says so, don't he? Birds of a feather flock together."

"He was only a kid."

"Just the same he was guilty."

"He was going to give himself up."

"Yeah!" jeered Skelton.

"I'm going to prove you unfit for office, sheriff," said Clune between clenched teeth. "There's a time when a lawman should shoot and a time when he shouldn't. I'm going to drive you out of Parson Creek for your murdering, bullying ways. This letter will help me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's proof that you don't know what justice means; it's an answer to your dirty lies about Buddy Herd and me. I'm going to show it to every man who voted for you."

"Go ahead, Shiny Boots. See what it gets you."

Skelton sounded confident, but there was hate written on his big dish face as he looked at Clune. He seemed to realize suddenly that at his age and with his past reputation he couldn't afford to lose his job. There mightn't be any others.

CLUNE turned and left him and began quickly circulating around the town. The lies that Skelton had spread were like a wall that Clune had to break through. It was late, too, and most of the folks had gone home. Those that hadn't looked at Clune coldly and were unwilling to listen to what he said. It wasn't until his eagerness and sincerity finally impressed them that they would read Buddy Herd's note.

Clune realized that he must do his work tomorrow, slowly, patiently, seeing and talking to as many people as he could, hoping that this pitiful, boyish scrawl would have its effect.

He called it a day and started back toward the Widow Keller's just after midnight. It was then that a stealthy movement along the shadows across the street caught his eye. Subconsciously perhaps he was watching for it, knowing the caliber of man that Skelton was.

He dropped on hands and knees and fell face forward just in time. A bullet sang its deadly way through the space that he had occupied a moment before.

There was nothing to see now, nothing to shoot at across the street. Whoever had fired at him had dodged back out of sight.

Clune lay in partial shadow close to where a low board fence was nailed to some hitch-rails. But those boots of his, smooth and shiny, were still in light. Another gun flame winked from a different spot and lead struck the dusk close to his thigh, almost creasing it.

He drew his feet in, made a jump and a dive over the low fence while his two assailants fired again.

He knew just what he faced now. Skelton had hired someone to aid him. Skelton was taking no chances. He didn't want to lose his job. He was going about the business of keeping it like a butcher, certain that with Clune out of the way he'd have a chance to hang on.

The fence was in front of an empty, boarded-up store and beyond the fence at both ends were pools of light from an upstairs window

across the way. Clune was trapped, one man against two, cornered like a hunted animal.

He raised his head an inch above the boards and almost paid for it with his life. Gunflame winked and lead poured through the thin wood close to him. He had no chance to see a target. He dropped again, hugging the ground, hearing bullets rip above him.

One of them would reach him surely if he stayed where he was. He began to crawl slowly forward, his gun out, knowing that death awaited him if he showed himself.

He went on to the end of the fence, paused there breathing hard. There was silence for a moment now. Skelton and his hired helper were waiting and Clune waited, too. If only either one would show himself for an instant! They had the advantage. They knew just about where he was and he didn't know where they were. He looked toward the patch of light ahead of him, meditating whether to make a run for it. No use, he thought. He'd be outlined like a coyote running across a patch of open desert. Then he looked at the boarded-up store, wondering if there was any way, without showing himself, of pulling a plank off and squirming inside. He gave that up, too. The boards were too high and were nailed down fast.

Then he had an idea. It blazed in his brain like a light, forcing a bitter, twisted grin to his lips. Skelton had made fun of him. Well, he'd throw that particular brand of humor back in Skelton's teeth.

He reached back, slowly pulled one boot off, then turned his whole body, keeping his head down low. He looked back toward the other end of the fence where shots had first smashed at him. It was fifteen feet away, marked by a square of light.

He tossed the boot toward it, judging the distance carefully, rolling the boot over and over and holding his breath till he saw its toe project beyond the fence. The polished surface glinted there for a moment.

THERE WAS an instant blare of guns from across the street. Bullets splintered the fence three feet ahead of the boot where Clune's prone body was supposed to be. He saw dust rise.

Cautiously, moving his head and arm a fraction of an inch at a time, he lifted himself, got his gun above the fence top and fired straight at one of those winking pinpoints of light.

There was a muffled cry, the sound of a gun clattering on stone, then the scuff of running feet. Clune waited, feeling sure that he had routed one of his foes at least. Presently he raised his head again, higher this time, and saw faint movement among the shadows across the street.

His gun and Darrel Skelton's sounded almost simultaneously. The lead from Skelton's Peacemaker came so close that Clune thought for a moment that he was hit. Then he realized it was only a sharp splinter of wood stabbing him. Skelton shouted a furious insult. He was alone now, separated from his hired gunman by Clune's ruse with the boot. He was desperate to end things quickly before people came. He lumbered into sight, fanning bullets at Clune viciously.

Clune rose, too. He felt the brush of death all around him. They faced each other and the thunder of their guns beat echoes off the walls of the adobe houses. Lead struck Clune high in the shoulder, spinning him around and making him grunt. He felt it, not so much as a pain at first but like a blow as if a fist had struck him. Just as he fell he fired again and his lead caught Skelton above the heart.

They dropped together, Clune toppling over the fence into unconsciousness; Skelton hitting the dust of the street full length, his brutal gun hand stilled forever.

The whole town woke up. Before Clune came to Patsy Herd squeezed her way through the curious crowd that gathered. She saw Clune's stockinged foot and a shudder shook her. There was that time-honored tradition about a gun-fighter and his boots!

"Wes!" she said, sobbing. "Wes, oh, darling!"

It took Clune himself, wincing with pain but grinning, to convince her that the tradition was all wet this once.

"Don't worry, honey!" he whispered. "I'm not going to cash in yet."

"But your boot!"

"I pulled it off myself before Skelton's lead even touched me. It helped draw his fire—his and that new deputy he hired to gun me down."

"He was no deptuy, Wes," said Patsy comfortingly. "I'm so glad he wasn't—glad for us both. They've found him and you hit him, but he had no badge on. That puts you in the clear."

Someone picked up Clune's boot and passed it to Patsy as she knelt anxiously at his side. Clune motioned first to it, then to his foot.

"Put it on me, Patsy. But dust it off first—just a little. Dad always said to keep my boots and my gun shiny clean. I guess he was right."

"I guess he was, Wes." She wiped the boot tenderly with her skirt hem, smiling down at him. "And I guess this town is going to want you as soon as you can stand up. Folks are beginning to talk already—about your dad and granddad and you, too—men who won't wear a lawman's badge either unless it's clean. They're saying that what Parson Creek needs is an honest young sheriff by the name of Wes Clune."

THE END

"There's no real Hope for us. We're doomed. We'll go down into oblivion and be forgotten unless . . ."

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HATE GUNS ★

by W. J. Reynolds

Ben Carew had a reason to hate gamblers, and to him Jeff Wofford was no different from any other. But Carew was wrong there, and his wrongness threw two lives into delicate balance . . .

HE WAS getting too old for this job, Ben Carew thought, as he approached the Big Luck marshal's office. His rheumatism had been much worse of late, tightening his joints until he could almost hear them squeak.

But he concealed it stubbornly, and held his back ramrod stiff, the granite angle of his jaw tough and unyielding. Only a careful observer could have detected the pain behind his leathery face, or yet, the deeper pain in his faded blue eyes.

Ben pushed through the door of the small box-like office, and nodded to Hal Kimberly, the day marshal. "How's things, Kim?"

"Quiet, so far," Kimberly said. He cut his bright brown eyes at Ben. "But I ain't expectin' 'em to stay that way!"

"What's up?" Ben took a pair of cuffs from the hook and slipped them through his belt. He picked up the double barreled shotgun from against the desk and checked the loads.

Kimberly licked a cigarette together and swung his feet off the desk and searched for a match. "Kerch Murdoc and his little gunhand, Chilly, came in on the 3:30 train. They're down at the Palace saloon."

Ben set the shotgun down, eyes suddenly sharp on Kimberly. "Murdoc ain't welcome in this town. No more than he was three years ago."

"Murdoc said he had some business here that had been botherin' him. Long as he couldn't leave till the next train, I didn't tell him to pull out. I figured you'd see he was on the 7:30 train anyway."

"He'll be on it, all right," Ben said. "Or in jail."

Kimberly lit his smoke, watching Ben from the corners of his eyes. "Ben," he said finally, "somebody else was on that train too."

"Well, spit it out, Kim, it ain't a secret, is it?"

"Jeff Wofford!"

Ben stiffened, and his face drained of all color. Then it came back in a rising tide. He glared at Kimberly until the day man licked dry lips.

"Ben, I—"

"I'll take over now," Ben said thickly.

Kimberly stood up quickly, and ground his cigarette under his heel. "Ben, you want me to stick around?"

"I can still handle the night job, I reckon."

"Yeah, sure," Kimberly hastily agreed, "but there's sure to be trouble, and I thought—"

"You can go, Kimberly!" Ben snapped, then he softened his bluntness a little. "Much obliged though, Kim."

BEN STARED after Kimberly's retreating back a full minute before he became aware that he was gripping the butt of his gun until his arm shook with the strain. He took his hand away from the gun and looked at his palm, watching the squeezed out blood return.

Kerch Murdoc, and Chilly. Jeff Wofford. Ben drew his gun and checked the well-oiled mechanism. Then he opened the loading gate and slipped a sixth shell into the chamber he usually carried empty.

Ben heard a gun blare over him as he tried to get up . . .

That gambling crowd hated Ben Carew, and, Ben suspected, they had never found another town as lucrative as Big Luck had been. They had rode high here, fleecing the miners who would buck their games, rolling drunks. A good many murders had been chalked up to them, but nothing proved. The money would up in their pockets one way or another. Kerch Murdoc had been the leader.

Ben Carew had stopped that. They hated him for it.

That damn tinhorn crowd had a nerve coming back to Big Luck. Murdoc could be expected to sooner or later though, a plain crook and murderer. But Jeff Wofford was different. Or was he? Still, he'd always had a reluctant sort of admiration for Wofford, the way he'd held himself above that gang he'd associated with. He'd done it without being high hat, too.

But they were all gamblers and hence, crooks. Ben Carew could have

no use for a man who preyed upon the weak, took bread from the mouths of women and kids...

One of Ben's close friends had been a sucker once. His wife and daughter had been found one morning at the bottom of the gulch, crushed. The daughter had gone to a honky-tonk, seeking money to feed herself and her mother...

No, Ben thought fiercely, Jeff Wofford hadn't been any different, actually, than Murdoc. He had merely been more clever and avoided crossing the law. Damn gamblers were all alike.

He had given Jeff Wofford a chance, let him alone and look what happened! The damn sneak had coyoted around behind Ben's back and stolen a gentle, decent girl with his soft-voiced lies!

Ben snapped the loading gate of his Colt and jammed it viciously back in its holster. Jeff Wofford was no better than Murdoc. Worse, even, because he was more clever. Ben Carew would fix that. He would fill Jeff Wofford's belly full of lead like he had promised he'd do if he ever saw him again.

Another thought hit Ben with the suddenness of a club. Had Beth come with Jeff? Was she here in Big Luck now? For a wild moment, Ben's legs trembled so violently that he had to sit down on the desk.

When the weakness had passed, Ben hitched up his gunbelt, tightening the tied-down holster, and went out the door. His boot heels made solid rings on the board walk as he walked toward the Palace saloon a dozen buildings down the street.

HE PUSHED through the swing doors and immediately saw Kerch Murdoc. The heavy jowled gambler was leaning on the bar, florid face pinched in at the top by a hard hat. His shoe button eyes were on Ben unblinkingly. Chilly, ferret-faced and deadly, stood beside him.

Ben's gaze moved down the bar to where it angled into the wall. Jeff Wofford leaned there, making short rings on the bar top with a whiskey glass. For a moment, Ben let the hate glare out of his eyes at Jeff.

Jeff Wofford met that stare calmly enough, but his mouth tightened a little at the corners. Ben jerked his attention back to Murdoc and Chilly. First things first. He would save the dessert till last. He had been waiting three years to face Jeff Wofford.

Ben stopped before Murdoc who had straightened and was facing Ben, legs spraddled, heavy body solid against the bar. His little eyes in the folds of flesh, were black and hating. Ben let his gaze move deliberately over Murdoc then pass on to Chilly whose hands were moving nervously near his guns, face pinched with the tension.

"Be still, Chilly," Ben said softly. "Damn still!"

Chilly froze, and Ben looked at Murdoc. "I ran you out of this town three years ago, Murdoc. You ain't no more welcome now than you were then. You or any of you back alley crowd of murderers and crooks! You be on that 7:30 train!"

Murdoc's eyes were murderous but his voice was calm enough when he said, "Little business here, Ben,"

"Be on that train."

"And if I ain't?" Murdoc was gripping a whiskey glass, oblivious of the whiskey that spilled down his flowery vest. "Remember you're gettin' old, Ben. Chilly can take you anytime!"

"You'll be on it, Murdoc," Ben said, and his eyes locked with the hating ones before him. "But if you think I'm too old, why don't you make your play now? You can join them two gunhands you sent here to kill me—in boothill! Or maybe your guts are the same color as they always were—yellow!"

Murdoc was trembling, his control cracking, and in the blind rage that consumed him, Ben thought he was going to draw, dig for the hideout gun he always carried. Chilly was crouched, face twisted.

"Chilly," Ben said, "put your hands on the bar."

"Let's take 'im, Kerch!" Chilly jerked out. "Let's take 'im!"

Ben's knees bent slightly, his eyes pale spots of ice in his leathery face. "Chilly, make your play or put your hands on the bar. Now!"

"Do like he says, Chilly!" Murdoc choked out. "We've got our plans!"

"Chilly!" Ben said softly.

With a wild curse, Chilly slapped his hands on the bar, almost sobbing his rage. If Ben remembered correctly, it always drove Chilly half out of his head to make his boss sing low.

"7:30, Murdoc," Ben said and moved down the bar to Jeff Wofford.

Jeff Wofford had turned to face Ben, elbow on the bar. "Howdy, Ben," he said.

BEN LOOKED at Jeff Wofford, at the man he had sworn to kill on sight, and he felt a slow growth of amazement at the strange reluctance he felt. He found himself staring at Jeff's face, at something there that bothered him. Then he saw what it was. His face used to be white with a gambler's pallor, but now his eyes were startlingly grey in his sun-and-wind-burned face.

Ben fanned the flame of his rage. "Wofford, I ought to kill you on sight like I said I'd do. But I'll give you a thief's chance! You be out of this town in ten minutes. I'll come looking for you then, and I'll shoot on sight!"

"Ben," Jeff Wofford said carefully, "I won't fight you. I didn't come here to defy you or hunt trouble. Beth sent me. She said tell you—"

Ben swung wildly and his hard fist caught Jeff Wofford solidly on the square chin, skidded him along the bar and piled him over a chair onto the floor. Jeff shook his head, hand gingerly caressing his chin. He lay there looking up at Ben, and his eyes were almost black now in his pale face.

"Ben," he said calmly, "I'd kill another man for that!"

"You'll get your chance in ten minutes!" Ben snarled and wheeled and stalked out, not even favoring Murdoc and Chilly with a glance.

Ben hit the walk outside and some of the stiffness melted out of his back. His age showed in the slope of his shoulders, and the wrack of stubborn rage left his face empty of firmness, with an old man's looseness. He was only half aware of entering his office and slumping into the chair at the desk.

He sat there in the growing darkness, unmoving, preferring the gloom to the lamp in the wall brackett. His mind was full of the events that had led to this final blowoff tonight. He could see now that he had been making a civic duty replace the one thing he had lived for up to three years ago. Beth, his daughter.

And, he thought bitterly, he had lost her along with the crooks and muderers and riff-raff of Bloody Alley. Four men had died in that fight, and as a result, two more later. Gunmen sent by Murdoc to kill Ben Carew.

Among the gamblers there had been easy, smiling Jeff Wofford. A man Ben had felt a grudging leaning toward, a sort of back handed admiration. Jeff Wofford had made no attempt to make people think he was anything but an easy-money man. He was a shrewd, natural poker player, daring without being foolishly reckless. He seemed to care little if he won or lost. But he usually won, and if he cheated, Ben had never found it out.

But Jeff Wofford had been a gambler, Ben thought grimly, and cheating was their stock in trade. Wofford had merely been clever. A man who would sneak behind another man's back and steal his daughter...

WHEN JEFF left Big Luck, he had taken Beth Carew with him, Ben's only daughter. Not even aware that they knew each other, Ben had been dazed by the shock. Then he had raged and sworn that he would kill Jeff Wofford on sight.

But, Ben told himself now, he had given Wofford the same chance that he'd give any two-bit crook. A better chance than he deserved. Better than he'd given Ben.

There was probably a son now. Little Ben...

Abruptly Ben stood up in the darkness. He struck a match and by his watch the ten minutes were up with five to spare. From habit, Ben lifted his gun, re-set it lightly in its holster. He left the office and cut down the alley behind the row of buildings, habit again.

Ben found that his palms were wet with sweat, and the reluctance was strong in him. For once, he faced this issue of Jeff Wofford squarely, not fooling himself. Could he shoot Beth's husband? Kill the man she had chosen? Ben heard his own muttered curse. He knew then that he could not.

Ben stopped in surprise. He didn't even want to fight Jeff! What he really wanted was to rush up to Jeff, not as a town tamer, but as an anxious father, and ask a thousand questions about the daughter he loved above all else. Ask about that possible grandson, too!

He didn't want any more trouble. He wanted peace that his sixty years entitled him to have and enjoy. Some of the peace he'd brought to a score of Big Lucks. A grandson on his knee, a chair in the sun, a daughter's familiar voice...

The shot came out of the weeds fifty feet to his right. It was a flash in his head, a distant pop. Jeff...

Ben knew he was falling but he couldn't seem to catch himself, his arms wouldn't obey his will. The ground hit him in the face and he rolled limply on his back. His head a pinwheel of fire. He tried to curse that bushwhacker but no sound came from his lips.

He heard a voice call cautiously. "I got him, all right, Kerch!"

Chilly! Ben thought, damn you, Chilly, you little murdering devil... Murdoc's little business!

Boots pounded near Ben and a voice shouted. A gun blared over him, a streak of muzzle flame darting toward the weeds. Ben tried to raise himself but only jerked his arms leadenly, a growing fire in them and his legs.

He saw the looming shape of a man over him, saw the muzzle flame again, raking those weeds. It was Jeff Wofford straddling him! Saving his life!

A bullet breathed past them from the weeds. Ben tried to yell at Jeff to get down but the words wouldn't come.

There were a lot of yells now from the main street, and his ear to the ground, Ben heard boot steps fading beyond the weeds. Chilly and Murdoc were selling out!

Ben's curse was a furious mumble. Jeff knelt beside him, hands exploring. "Take it easy, old timer," Jeff said. "It looks like you've only been creased!"

MEN SHOUTED questions from the street, cautiously approaching. Jeff called to them and their boots pounded into a run. There was a lot more yelling then. As Jeff started to lift Ben, angry hands tore him away.

They cursed Jeff Wofford, angrily, viciously. A man lashed out with a gun barrel and it cracked on Jeff's head. Another hit him, and Ben amazed, saw them pile onto Jeff and bear him to the ground.

Slowly it came to Ben then as he sorted out their shouted words. They thought Jeff had shot him! Bushwhacked him!

"String 'im up!" a man shouted. "Take 'im down to the livery barn!"

A storm of voices took up the cry, the rising roar of a mob. They were going to hang Jeff! Then another thought shocked through Ben Carew, running like a clarion call through his head.

Let them go. Let them hang Jeff Wofford, and Beth would be free to come home. Come home to Ben. He would be clear. He would have no hand in it, was powerless to prevent it. All he had to do was keep still for a few minutes.

Ben tried to yell at the townsmen, to curse them for fools. But the words were only mumblings on his stiff lips. Sympathetic hands lifted him up. Ben tried to strike at them with leaden arms. As they lifted him

up, he saw others bearing Jeff Wofford off toward the livery barn.

They carried Ben into the Palace and laid him on the bar. Curley, the bartender, poured a shot of whiskey down him, a streak of fire in Ben's throat. But it sent a warmth through Ben. His head started to ache thunderingly.

Curley gave him another shot, a big one from a water glass. Some of the roar cleared from Ben's head. But there was another roar falling on his ears. The mob! They were hanging Jeff!

Ben rolled off the bar and found that his legs would support him. He clung to the bar as the room whirled. Cullin, the druggist, tried to boost Ben back upon the bar. Ben angrily slung his hands off.

As the room stopped its spin, Ben glared at Cullin. He saw Curley holding the bottle of whiskey uncertainly. Ben glared at both of them, gripping the bar.

"Ben," Cullin said, "take it easy a minute. The bullet creased your—"

"They're hanging Jeff!" Ben's intended bellow was only a growl. "Damn them—"

"Just be still a minute, Ben," Cullin said. "We don't like riff-raff coming here and gunning down our marshal! Just relax a minute and it will be over—"

Ben cursed and grabbed the bottle from Curley and took a long drink, gurgling the raw whiskey down his scorched throat. But it sent a flood of warmth through him, steadied his palsied legs. He saw his gun lying on the bar and snatched it off, cramming it into his holster. He went at a staggering run for the door.

He ignored Cullin's and Curley's shouts behind him, hearing only the wild howl of the mob down the street. He could see the waving torches in front of the livery barn, and Jeff's head over the milling group. A rope snaked upward.

BEN RAN. He ran with sudden, overwhelming fear putting strength into his legs. Jeff was standing on something, he saw, a rope around his neck, and the other end over the hay lift. A dozen men lay hold of the rope, ready to heave.

Then Ben cursed wildly as he saw the hard hat of Kerch Murdoc there in the fore, holding to the rope. Chilly was behind him, ready to pull, too.

Ben hit the outer edge of the crowd, bulling through them, his voice rising above the mob roar. "Hold it! Damn you, stop that!"

Men turned at that familiar bellow, and surprised yells lifted around Ben. They opened for him.

Ben plowed to a stop by Jeff Wofford and tore the rope from around his neck. Ben whirled on the crowd, and he didn't miss the consternation and rage that flooded Kerch Murdoc's florid face, and contorted the ferret face of Chilly.

"You misguided f o o l s!" Ben roared as the men quieted, staring at him. "Jeff Wofford didn't shoot me!"

"Who did then, Ben?" a voice yelled. "He was over you with a hot gun!"

"Yes, he was," Ben agreed more quietly now he had their attention. "He was over me with a gun, all right; he saved my life!"

They shifted uneasily, glanced furtively at Jeff Wofford, suddenly ashamed of their impulsive actions. Jeff Wofford's face was pale and tight but now he grinned shakily.

"I'd sure hate to have you fellers real mad at me!" he said.

There was a quick, relieved laugh, a breaking of the tension. But Ben, knowing the instant feel when he had won, was already ignoring them, watching Murdoc and Chilly. Both were easing back into the crowd.

They knew what would happen to them now if Ben spoke up with a shred of proof. The mob could, and would, swing just as quickly back to violence again. Ben saw that, despite the coolness, Murdoc's florid face was suddenly dripping sweat, Chilly had his guns half out."

"Murdoc, you and Chilly are under arrest!" Ben said. "You two tried to kill me!"

"That's a lie!" Murdoc shouted, his voice rising shrilly in the sudden dead silence. "We had nothin' to do with it!" His eyes darted around the quiet, staring men. "Don't listen to that old lyin' devil! He's crazy!"

"I ain't crazy, Murdoc," Ben said grimly. "That was your business here, to bushwhack me! I heard Chilly call to you after he shot me! He said, 'I got 'im, all right, Kerch!' You'll hang, Murdoc!"

There was a sudden growl from the crowding men, and Murdoc, his face dead white, button eyes wide with fear, saw no opening in those tight ranks, no mercy in the grim faces. Chilly was crouched, guns out.

"Hang 'em!" it was a concerted shout.

A flung torch hurtled at Chilly, and the little gunman leaped numbly aside just as Murdoc screamed, "Chilly," and dug for his hideout gun.

Chilly's bullet hit Ben in the side. Then the gun that had tamed a dozen rough towns was out, Ben's calloused thumb slipping the hammer. Chilly died as he rocked the hammer for a second shot.

"Murdoc—" Ben's shout died as Murdoc fired.

BUT IN his haste the gambler missed. Ben tilted the muzzle of his gun at those flaring, button eyes, and dropped the hammer. He lifted it and dropped it again. Murdoc suddenly wheeled in a short circle, terror-cry dying in his throat, eyes blank, red spots. The snub-nosed gun fell from his hand and he sprawled over the body of Chilly.

Ben felt hands lifting him again, and with surprise he saw that he was sitting down. The ache in his head was a whirling mixture of sound that faded into darkness.

Ben awoke in his own bed in the hotel. His head throbbed dully, and his side was a mass of pain. His mouth was dry and fuzzy. He saw Jeff Wofford in a chair near him, propped againt the wall.

"How you feeling, old timer?" Jeff asked and his grey eyes were anxious.

"Dry," Ben muttered thickly. "Plumb dry."

Jeff got up and poured a glass of water from a pitcher. He brought it and held the glass while Ben drank thirstily.

Then Ben was staring at Jeff's hand around the glass. He remembered those hands, long and supple, the skin as delicate as a woman's. Jeff Wofford could deal a deck of cards too fast to see more than a blur, and a rising stack of cards.

But his hands weren't like that now. They were still long and slim but not white. They were brown and callouses had thickened them in the palms, spread the fingers a little. They were the hands of a man who worked. Hard. Say of a man who handled a rope and a post hole digger and a pitchfork. Done the thousand and one things a struggling rancher had to do.

Jeff saw Ben's stare and turned his hands over, smiling a little. "Look different from what you remember, eh, Ben?"

"They're not a gambler's hands, Jeff."

"No. A rancher's hands, Ben. And I like it. It's been tough sledding, but Beth and I about have it now. So we can breathe easy. You see, I promised Beth I wouldn't gamble anymore."

"Jeff," Ben said with the hardness of a man who finds unbending a tough job, "you mentioned that Beth sent word..." Ben plucked at the covers and swallowed, his insides squeezed in a knot of fear. Fear that Jeff would tell him to go to hell.

"Yes," Jeff said gently. "Beth sent me, Ben. We want you to resign this job and come home. Beth is all time talking about what you always wanted when you retired. A chair in the sun, a grandson to joggle, a daughter to grumble at..." Jeff grinned at Ben, his brown face boyish and proud. "Well, Ben, we got all those things for you! How about it?"

THERE WAS a fist sized lump in Ben's throat and he glared out the window, blinking. Then some-

thing Jeff was saying exploded in Ben's brain.

"...named him Ben Canfield Wofford—"

Ben whirled back toward Jeff so violently that Jeff broke off in surprise, staring at Ben.

"Did you say Canfield? You named my grandson after that damned card game's inventor? You—you—" Ben choked, his face a violent red, glaring at Jeff.

"Why, yes," Jeff said cautiously. "I had Richard Canfield in mind. He runs an honest game. Anybody in New York can tell you—"

"They ain't no honest gamblers!" Ben roared. "My grandson! Named after a card sharp!"

"Ben," Jeff said, his face carefully blank, "if a rancher buys a hundred head of feeders to sell next year, what is he doing?"

"Why, he's gamb—he's hoping to profit—" Ben glared at Jeff.

"Exactly," Jeff said. "He's gambling that he'll make a profit on them. I just did that a couple of weeks ago, bought a hundred head for my Ace-up brand—"

"The Ace-up!" Ben roared and then suddenly the fire ran out of him and he sank back upon the pillow, conscious of the knifing pain in his side.

Maybe Jeff was right, and he was just an old has-been who ought to keep his mouth shut. Maybe everything was a gamble. Life, too.

Ben looked at Jeff and saw the twinkle in his grey eyes, and then Ben was grinning wryly as he reached for Jeff's hand. They laughed together then.

"Beth will have a fit when she sees you, Ben," Jeff said. "And Canfield—"

Ben scowled. "We'll call that boy Ben! Little Ben!" By grab, a grandpa ought to have some rights!

THE END

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND July 2, 1946

Of Double Action Western, published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass. for October 1, 1950.
State of New York) ss.
County of New York)

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Double Action Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Managing editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Business manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Harold Hammond, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is—(This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1950. Maurice Coyne (My commission expires March 30, 1952. (SEAL)

West Coast Pirate

by Rex Whitechurch

Stranger than fiction is this true story of a woman the people of San Francisco believed to be a competent doctor, and perfectly respectable.

THE YEAR was 1880 and the place was the bustling and growing city on the coast; but at that time it was rife with crime, harlots, and crooked politicians, all striving to make their stakes without having to dig in the ground to get them. Big Sidney Calvert, who said he had come from South America, had organized a band of owlhoots and these ruffians terrorized the city, often plundering bawdy houses and shops and carrying off the prettiest working girls.

Sarah Ann Pennington's father was a physician and he issued black pills, which came under the head of physic, with great abandon. He was killed while attending a patient who, because he had an aching tooth, thought Doctor William Pennington was torturing him and blasted away with his six shooter. This left Ann alone—she preferred to be called Ann—and she went ahead with her father's practice.

She was a pretty girl of twenty three, brown haired and brown eyed and slim made, with long shapely legs and a waist so small a man could span it with his hands. She buried her father and returned to the house and a man got up off the porch and followed her into her office. She did not know it but there was a thousand dollars on his head, dead or alive. He was none other than Senor Calvert.

"I have a bullet wound down low in my belly," he announced placidly, "and I'm afraid if the wound isn't stitched closed I'll bleed to death on my feet. You can see how my pants are wet with gore."

She told him to undress and when she had stretched him out on the table in her operating room, she cleansed and bathed the wound in disinfectants and had her two burly servants carry him off and put him to bed. In going through his clothes to establish his identity she found a reward poster and about a thousand dollars in crisp paper money.

She studied the outlaw's face and decided not to call the police; when he recovered would be time enough.

Sarah Ann fell in love with Calvert and thus began one of the most bizarre romances the west had ever heard of. She gave up her practice and followed him in his depredations, until finally they turned pirate off the coast and had the whole world looking for them. Calvert commanded a small sloop that carried two guns, one fore and one aft, and he had a crew of the most bloodhungry varmints ever assembled to man a ship such as the *Sarah Ann*.

Many attempts were made to capture the smugglers, but none succeeded. Sarah Ann was not recognized and not infrequently she returned to her office and conducted her practice until the urge grew too strong to join her lover. She suddenly hit upon a clever scheme. Why not kidnap her wealthy patients, many of whom were prominent in social life, Spaniard's and what have you, and demand big money for their return alive? She took the matter up with Calvert and the scheme was carried out. It is said they amassed a small fortune before they were run to ground.

The *Sarah Ann* plied the coast, picking up men but never discharging them. The vessel became a bloody murder boat and more than one unlucky seaman who joined on was slain and tossed overboard for the sharks. It seemed neither Ann

Sarah Ann enjoyed torturing her victims.

nor her husband had a single qualm, and this girl who had been born in society became so dangerous a fiend that the reward grew from one thousand to twenty thousand for the apprehension of Calvert and his pirate girl.

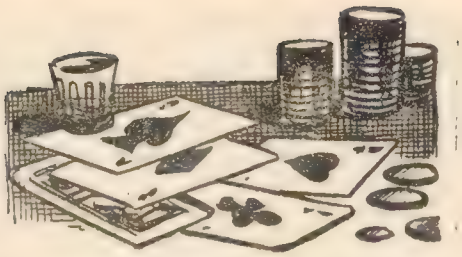
Still Sarah Ann had not been found out. More than one hundred victims were kidnapped, carried aboard the vessel, taken carried to South America, and then killed when their loved ones dug up enough ransom money to interest the pirates. Ann herself swung the sword that decapitated more than one captive.

But these things could not go on forever. One day a giant Negro, Sam Brown he called himself, was hired to ship out on the *Sarah Ann*, to serve as cook. The third day out, with a dozen kidnap victims in the hole, Sam Brown took a strange fancy to Sarah Ann. She entered the kitchen once too often, and never left it again.

Sam knew that if Calvert saw the body he would have him shot. Brown stole out and killed the pirate with a belaying pin. Then he ordered the crew to head for port and when he got there he turned the bodies over to the authorities and released the suffering captives. He used Ann's pantaloons as a flag of surrender.

For this act, even though he had committed rape and murder, Brown was paid off in big money and became a kind of hero. It was too bad that his penchant for pretty girls led to his lynching, because when he attacked a bar maid in a tavern and was tracked down by bloodhounds, the mob strung him up.

Thus ended the crimson trail of the San Francisco pirates who were among the first kidnappers of this country. It is said in the old newspaper files that Sarah Ann Pennington and her lover collected more than a million in ransom money before Sam Brown despoiled their kingdom.



STORM STAKES

by Cliff Walters

No one had accused Andy Shawnell of murdering his partner; no one had come out and said it, that is. But he was branded with the mark of Cain in their thoughts.

THERE WAS no wind with the snow. Just big, downy flakes falling on the sod roofs of Spearville where Fern Holdredge, sitting by the stove in her father's general store, gazed with solemn dark eyes at the storm blur enveloping the street.

"If this keeps up, there won't be much of a crowd at the dance tomorrow night," opined Brink Maulson, a husky, florid-complexioned young man sitting on a tilted-back chair beyond the stove.

"No, I guess not," said the girl, without enthusiasm.

"What's the matter?" asked her companion, who owned the livery barn in this small range town. "Don't dances mean anything to the smoothest waltzer in the county any more? Oh, I know things ain't been quite the same for you, Fern, since another smooth dancer got killed. But Dalt Webster's dead now, and there's no use moonin' about him. I'm not such a bad dancer myself, if you'd take the trouble to notice. And if you'd like to go to the dance with me—"

"I'm not going with anyone, Brink," she answered. "Nor am I 'mooning' about anyone, as you call it. I just keep wondering...wondering who ended Dalton Webster's life. And why."

"Well, he was packin' a few hundred dollars with him, wasn't he? And the money was gone when he was found out there in Cayuse Draw. That's one angle. And now his pard, Andy Shawnell, owns the little bunch of cattle and ranch out there on Hawk Mesa. Some say that—"

"Some say this! Some say that!" stormed old Bob Holdredge, storekeeper, who was working at his battered desk a few feet away. "I wish some of you stove-warmin' sheriffs and lawyers'd stop forever guessin' and hintin'! If you think Andy Shawnell was coward enough to shoot his pard in the back, and just to fall heir to a few head of cattle and a little one-horse ranch, swear out a warrant for his arrest!"

"Maybe it wasn't just the cattle and ranch," Brink Maulson retorted. "They both was shinin' up to Fern here and—"

"Leave my name out of it, will you?" said the girl, and now her dark eyes were flashing ominously. "I've lost enough sleep over—"

She broke off. A rider, a tall man, was taking shape out of the storm blur. A moment later he was tying his buckskin at the hitch rack, was

stomping snow off his boots as he crossed the store porch. He was Andy Shawnell, sandy-haired, blue of eye. A lean, enduring-looking young man.

Fern said to him, "Was there something you wanted?"

"I want to hire a rider to help me drive my dogies over to Batch Clark's haystacks in Meadow Swale," he answered. "I've been fightin' 'em along alone, but I'll never make Batch's place by dark, not in this storm, unless—" He turned and looked at Brink Maulson.

"You bought Batch's hay?" Maulson asked.

"I will when I get there," said the tall man. "I figgered I'd need it if the snow buried the range feed any deeper. Batch said he'd hold his hay for me till the first of the month."

"This is the second—Groundhog Day," Bob Holdredge reminded him. "I don't think Batch has made a deal, though. At least, he hasn't been in town to celebrate. Maybe Brink'll spare a few hours to cowboy for you, Andy. His barn ain't doin' enough business right now to bust out the seams of that money sack I let him keep in my safe there."

"Has everybody on the range got to know where I keep my money?" demanded the young stablekeeper, displeased as he rose from his chair that had come down on its front legs with a thump.

"Yeah, you want to be careful about tellin' *me* where money is, Bob," said Andy Shawnell, and the bitterness of his tone carried a sting that Fern felt sharply.

BRINK MAULSON seemed to feel that sting, too. He clumped toward the door and slammed it behind him. Andy Shawnell unbuttoned his sheep-lined coat and reached in his shirt pocket for the makin's. Fern saw the gunbelt buckled around lean hips. She looked away quickly.

Andy said, "I guess I wasted my time comin' to town. Nobody wants to work for *my* money, as Maulson just proved. If the killer of Dalt Webster hasn't been found by the time Spring breaks, I'll be movin' on to new range."

"Running?" Fern blurted the word out before she thought.

Andy Shawnell looked at her with direct blue eyes and said, "That's what they'll say—yeah. But they might as well say that with their mouths as be sayin' 'Murderer!' with their eyes every time they see me."

Buttoning his coat, he headed for the door. He was on his buckskin horse, riding into the storm blur when Bob Holdredge suddenly turned to his silent daughter and said, "Why did you have to bring up that 'runnin'' business? And why are your eyes brimmin' over?"

Fern couldn't have spoken if she had wanted to just then. She averted her face and headed for the door leading to the living quarters which adjoined the store. Her father called: "Listen for customers, girl! I'm goin' up to the saloon and get a drink. Maybe a couple! Yeah, and I wish I'd invited Andy to go with me!"

IT WAS shortly past noon when Fern, astride her roan pony, came upon a lone man fighting some fifty head of Whiteface cattle through the snow. The girl took a pair of neatly-wrapped sandwiches from her saddle pocket, proffered them to the rider who had halted his buckskin horse and said: "A bite of lunch for you, Andy. And *I'll* help you haze these cattle over to Meadow Swale."

"Why?" he asked flatly.

"Partly because dumb critters like to eat the same as people," she answered.

"But this is no kind of weather for a girl to be out in," he countered. "It was nice of you to fetch sandwiches way out here in these hills, but now you'd better get back to town."

She seemed not to hear. She fell in behind the lagging cattle which, with a rider on each flank of the herd, began to move faster.

After a while Andy called, "Best grub I've had in a long time! I never could make bread fit to eat. Dalt used to be pretty good at it, but—" The words broke off.

Perhaps Andy Shawnell was remembering, as was Fern, the day she had showed Dalt Webster how to mix bread, how to cover the dough and keep it warm until it was kneaded into loaves. A husky, dark young man who worried little and laughed often, Dalt had been wearing one of Fern's aprons when Andy had come to the door of the Holdredge kitchen and said: "Well, look who's turned into a beautiful he-doll with an apron on! I'll bet he'd even say 'Mamma' if you squeezed him hard enough—with a pair of blacksmith's tongs. Golly! If he had his lovely black hair curled, Fern, and a red ribbon tied around it—"

Then Andy, grinning broadly, had been obliged to duck a hastily moulded ball of dough that had come flying toward his sandy-colored head.

Dalt had said, "It's about time *one* of us learned how to build something out of dough. All our horses are gettin' sway-backed on account of the weight in them biscuits of yours. I keep tellin' you that if you'd make 'em a little bigger, we could roll 'em down to the nearest U.S. Army post and sell 'em for cannon balls—roll 'em because we'd never be able to lift 'em into a wagon."

Fern's laughter had filled the tidy kitchen she had taken over when her mother had passed away five years before. She kept on laughing as the banter between the two pards kept see-sawing back and forth. But Dalt, an apt and determined pupil, had learned to make bread. Bread he had broken with Andy Shawnell in the little cabin out at Mesa Springs up until the day he had sold a bunch of saddle horses he and Andy had broken. Andy hadn't wanted to sell those horses to a local buyer. He had argued that the bigger mounts would bring higher prices as cavalry horses—had argued the point in the Holdredge store in Spearville.

But Dalt Webster, alone at the ranch when a local horse buyer had come along, had sold the horses and had headed—it was presumed—to the nearest bank, the one in Mound Rock, the county seat, to deposit the money. He had gotten as far as the spot where the trailed dipped into Cayuse Draw. There his journey, and life, had ended in a blast of gunfire. And now Andy Shawnell stood in shadows darker than those cast by the scraggly cedars that lined the rim of Cayuse Draw. The pards had quarreled, people said, about the sale of their horses. Now Dalt was dead, and Andy owned the little outfit....

THE BIG, downy flakes kept falling upon two riders who urged their slow-moving herd toward old Batch Clark's place in Meadow Swale. Two or three times Andy urged Fern to return to town, but she stayed on the job.

Because she did stay, the little herd began trailing down the slope leading into Meadow Swale a half-hour before the February dusk settled over the hills. The cattle began to move faster through the knee-deep snow. They were going downhill; and, through the storm blur, they could see the dimly-silhouetted stacks of wild hay looming ahead.

As they neared Batch Clark's cabin, Andy called, "Let's go in and warm up a little, Helper! The dogies'll drift on toward them stacks by themselves!"

Dread tugged at a girl's heart as she reined her little roan alongside Andy's big buckskin. She had glimpsed, through the hay window of Batch's log barn, a bald-faced bay horse tied to the manger. She wondered what would happen in the next few minutes. How would her long gamble turn out? She must be alert and—

"Come in, folks!" bellowed grizzled, gangling old Batch from the doorway of his log abode. "The more the merrier!"

Fern dismounted and stepped within the none-too-neat cabin. She saw Brink Maulson sitting by the stove in the corner of the room, a smug smile on his red face. Behind her Andy Shawnell was saying, "Well, Mr. Maulson, you did brave the storm after all?"

"I never let a few snowflakes interfere with my business," Maulson replied.

"Have a drink, Andy!" said old Batch loudly. "It'll warm you up—and Brink fetched out a whole quart!"

Fern saw the half-empty bottle on the table. She also saw that Brink Maulson was wearing his pearl-handled six-shooter today.

"No, thanks," Andy said, his blue gaze fastened curiously on the Spearville stablekeeper. "What business are you referrin' to, Maulson?"

"I buy and sell a little hay, the same as I do a little livestock," was the reply. "I bought Batch's hay just a little while ago—and paid him cash money for it."

"That's right," Batch agreed, the exuberance ebbing from his voice, "I promised you I'd hold my hay for you till the first of the month, Andy. This is the second, as I guess you know."

"Yeah, I know!" Andy replied, and Fern heard the ring of steel in his voice as he slowly unbuttoned his sheepskin coat and reached for the makin's. "Andy offered me his hay for six dollars a ton, Maulson. Now, after some fast work, how much are *you* goin' to ask me for it?"

"Don't know for sure that I'll sell it," Maulson responded. "Feed's mighty scarce on this range, as I've found out. Of course, if you'd offer me enough—"

"What's your idea of *enough?*" Andy drawled.

"Fifteen dollars a ton!" Maulson snapped harshly. "And you'd better jump at the chance. There can be a lot more snow between now and the first of April. And there can be some carcasses layin' in the drifts—carcasses bearin' the Z Bar brand. The brand an unlucky gent named Dalton Webster inherited from his old dad!"

"Hold on now, Brink," old Batch Clark cut in. "I wouldn'tv'e sold you my hay if I'd knowed Andy was actually trailin' his dogies in this direction—and dependin' on my hay. Fifteen a ton! Why, that's robbery! Dang your hide, did you know Andy was headed here? Is that why you burnt the snow gettin' out here, and totin' a quart bottle?"

"That's why," Andy Shawnell replied glacially. "If I hadn't made the mistake of ridin' into Spearville, and speakin' words in coyote ears—"

"Be a little careful about who you're callin' coyote!" Maulson cut in, and it was evident that a few drinks had fortified his courage. "You're in enough trouble as it is—even if they haven't got you behind bars!"

FERN SAID, "Remember how Dalt used to brand his money with a needle sometimes, Andy? With a Z Bar? Let's see that money Brink gave you, will you, Batch? I know he took his roll out of Dad's safe after Andy left town and—"

"What are you drivin' at?" Maulson yelled, coming to his feet.

Fern ignored that question. Trembling underneath, but forcing herself to appear calm, she took the money Batch tossed on the table. She picked a fifty-dollar bill from the roll. She walked over to the window, pressed that bill against the glass and said: "It's branded with a pin or needle, all right. Keep your hand away from your gun, Brink! Look out, Andy, or—"

Fern's wild cry went unfinished. A storm was breaking in a white-roofed range cabin. A girl, terror suddenly gripping her heart, was flinging herself at old Batch Clark and bowling the tall, stupidly-blinking man away from his position between Brink Maulson and Andy Shawnell. A table upset. A quart bottle clattered to the plank floor. And there was an instant when regret clawed with fierce talons at a girl who had dared press a fifty-dollar bill against the unclean pane of Batch Clark's window.

But Andy Shawnell had been watching Maulson intently. The young cowman had read the expression on that red, twisting face. He seemed to know, as had Fern, that the stablekeeper's hand would be holster-diving. Now that hand did dive.

Old Batch let out a bellow of warning at Andy. Fern screamed again. The pearl-handled gun came up fast,

but so did the old black gun swung at Andy Shawnell's hip. Andy took a quick step sidewise as his own gun arced upward. Perhaps it was that maneuver. the act of a man who was using his head as well as a quick right hand, that saved him from Maulson's lead as the two guns cracked almost simultaneously.

Powder flames struck at each other across the semi-dark cabin. A slug nipped the shoulder seam of Andy's sheeplined coat and tore into the log at his back. His own slug tore deep through Brink Maulson's right shoulder. The stablekeeper's oath died in a grunt as he rocked and toppled over on the stove.

Andy leaped across the cabin and yanked the victim of his bullet off the stove. With his left hand he hurled Maulson against the wall, pinned him there as he said: "How come *you're* packin' Dalt Webster's money? Tell me, or I'll put another bullet through your—"

"I killed him—took his money!" Maulson groaned, the color ebbing from his florid face. "I sent that buyer out to get his horses—when you was gone!"

"So I heard—only yesterday!" Fern cried. "But Dalt didn't brand *this* particular bill!" She exhibited it. "*I* branded it, and put it back in the safe—when I felt sure you were heading out here to buy Batch's hay—and then hold Andy up on it!"

There was a long, breathless pause. Then Andy blurted, "Good golly, girl! So *that's* why you wanted to be here!"

"That's—why," she said, and slumped weakly down into the nearest chair. "I couldn't bear to see you travel any longer, and bearing the cross that something, deep in my heart, told me you didn't deserve to bear! And I felt that you'd be willing to risk your life to clear yourself."

IT HAD stopped snowing on the haystacks that Andy Shawnell had bought. The moon was breaking through the clouds as the young man and Fern followed a wagon toward Spearville, a wagon driven by Batch Clark whose passenger, wounds bound, was heading toward the jail bars he had mentioned earlier this evening.

"Think you'll be able to take me to that dance tomorrow night, Andy?" said a dark-eyed girl as a buckskin horse crowded close to her little roan.

"It'll be heaven to dance with you again," he answered huskily. "I only wish Dalt could be here to..." His voice trailed off.

"He'd be glad. He thought *almost* as much of you as I do," she said. "He knew it was you I loved, Andy. I told him so."

"And now you're tellin' me?"

"Do I have to?"

"No," he answered. "Not after what you've done for me today."

His hand reached out and took the hand of a girl who had gambled dangerously on a hunch. But she had won that gamble and the high stakes of happiness for herself and the man she loved. If there was snow on the hills tonight, the promise of coming Spring was in the air; and in the heart of a girl whose courage had snapped the shackles of darkness.

THE END

THE STRANGLERS of DODGE CITY

TRUE FACT ARTICLE

by

Wayne D. Mote

STEALING another man's horse during the early days of the West violated the most sacred law known in the territories. Because of the wide distances between points of civilization, losing a horse was the worst thing that could happen to a man. Often it meant death for a man, unless he was strong enough to make it on foot to the next town or to the next water hole. Also, a horse was sometimes a man's only possession, outside of his gun and the clothes he wore.

For these reasons, horse-stealing in the old West became the worst of all crimes, and its punishment the severest. It was possible to get away with murder...but not with horse stealing. A man would trail down and kill another man for stealing his horse quicker than he would for committing murder. The word "horsethief" was the most wicked name you could call a man, and it led to many a bloody gun fight in the territory trail towns.

One of the first western towns to organize a vigilance committee for the discouragement of horse-stealing was Dodge City. Their organization became known as "The Stranglers." It was made up of about fifty men ...a dozen or more of which were available for duty at all times. They wore no masks or hoods; everybody in Dodge knew the identity of these men and respected them or feared them...according to which side of the law they were on. When a horse-thief was caught, the man was investigated to make sure he was guilty, then he was lynched accordingly. The Stranglers had their own method of lynching, which gave them their name and made them the most feared of any vigilante organization in the territories.

The Stranglers didn't wait for the law to take action when a horse-thief was on the prowl; they went after the man themselves. Nearly always, they came back with the man they went after, even if they had to follow him across the country. Wild Bill Hickok and the other lawmen of Dodge didn't interfere with the affairs of this organization.

A man known as Mysterious Dave was the leader of The Stranglers. No other name was known for this man. Nobody knew where he came from or anything about his past history; and nobody asked him. A man just didn't ask another man his business in the early days of Dodge...when it was known as "the city at the end of steel." (It was at the end of the Santa Fe Railroad, and at the end of civilization) All kinds of men came to Dodge. They came from all parts of the country and for lots of reasons, and every man's reason was his own business. Nobody asked any questions of anybody else; it just wasn't considered polite...nor healthy.

MYSTERIOUS DAVE was a lean, hard-faced man about forty years old, who looked as mysterious as his past history was believed to be. He had a quiet manner of authority about him that caused other men to obey and respect him when he spoke. Dave had been educated in an Eastern university, had travelled all over the country and

knew it well. He was smart, a natural-born leader of men, and he had nothing but hate and contempt for a horse-thief. He was always on hand to lead The Stranglers when there was a situation that needed taking care of.

One day young Bart Cavanar was riding toward town when he met up with Mysterious Dave and ten other riders. "'Mornin', Dave," Bart hailed, reining up.

"Hi, kid," Mysterious Dave said cordially. "Come on and ride with us if you want to; we got a little business to tend to out at the cottonwood."

Young Bart's pulse beat rapidly with anticipation. He had heard of "The Cottonwood" and what it was used for. He fell in alongside Mysterious Dave, feeling honored at having a special invitation to ride with The Stranglers. He was curious to see them in action. The posse of men laughed and joked as they rode; they showed no more feeling than if they had been going on a Sunday picnic, Bart thought.

But there was one man among the group Bart had not seen before, a complete stranger. The man was sick-faced, pale, and never spoke or listened to the other men's cheerful conversations. Bart knew this was the man...the reason for the ride to a place known as "the cottonwood" by everybody in the territory. This man was a horse-thief who had been caught, proven guilty, and had the silent judgement of The Stranglers passed on him.

The party reined up at a giant cottonwood tree on the bank of the Arkansas River. The tree was dead, bleached white, and naked of bark. Its bare limbs reached high toward the clouds like the fingers of a ghost straining for a victim. On its lower limbs hung more than a dozen weather-browned ropes with empty nooses dangling, spinning, and twisting in the hot, steamy summer breeze. Then the boy looked into the top of the tree and he understood why the nooses now were empty. Pink-headed turkey buzzards were gathering boldly for another feeding they knew was to come...looking down at the men with greedy, snake-like eyes, waiting...knowing by experience and instinct what their reward would be for waiting.

The stench of decayed flesh stung Bart's nose. He looked at the ground. Bones of what once had been several men lay under the tree where they had fallen after being picked apart by the razor-sharp beaks of the birds, and had fallen on the ground to be chewed and scattered by prairie wolves. Bits of tattered, rotten clothing rustled gently among the bleached bones and skulls in the stiffling summer wind.

Bart felt an icy wedge in the middle of his guts and he was afraid he was going to puke. He wanted to run...to get away; but he couldn't let The Stranglers know how he felt, let them laugh at him and think he was just a scared kid. He turned his head away, and held his breath, trying not to breathe the acrid stench of human decay that rose from the earth around him.

THE CONVICTED horse-thief sat quietly in his saddle while Mysterious Dave tied his hands behind him with a piece of little rope. Another man unfastened a new lariat from his saddle horn and began fashioning a hangman's noose. Finished, he flung the wicked-looking noose over a strong limb twenty feet from the ground...only a few feet from an empty weatherbeaten noose that was still attached to the limb, where a man had been hanged before and his carcass left hanging like an unwanted animal for the meat-hungry vultures that squawked and screamed in the top of the cottonwood tree.

Two of The Stranglers led the horse-thief's mount under the tree, stopping it at the spot where the noose dangled menacingly. The man acting as executioner put the noose over the man's head with the knot under the left ear. He drew the rope up tight against the man's flesh. Then he pulled the rope taunt and anchored it with several turns and a double slip knot around the base of

a strong limb that could be reached from the saddle. The ten Stranglers turned toward the convicted man when they were finished. Their eyes were cold with hatred and unsympathetic contempt was their only feeling toward a man low enough to steal another man's horse.

"You got any last words...any message for anybody?" Mysterious Dave asked the man.

The sad-faced man shook his head and didn't look up. He didn't beg or plead for mercy as Bart imagined he would; he just sat his saddle with his chin against his chest, his eyes betraying the only emotion he felt ...shame. Young Bart couldn't understand this...how he could be more scared than the man who was actually going to be hung...and how men could be so cruel as to lynch another human being?

Then, to Bart's surprise, and without saying a word, The Stranglers turned their horses around and rode off. Bart couldn't understand what was going on... They hadn't run the horse out from under the man. He looked back and the man with the noose on his neck still sat his horse, his head turned toward Bart, his eyes pleading like a dog in trouble and begging for help. Bart wanted to defy The Stranglers and go back to help the man...to cut him loose, free him from his fate. This was torture, this peculiar method of hanging that The Stranglers of Dodge City used. Bart had heard of men being lynched, but he couldn't imagine a man waiting in agony to be strangled when his horse left him.

This man probably would sit there for hours, waiting, dreading, frantically hoping for a miracle to save him from this gruesome end. But Bart realized that nothing had ever saved a man once The Stranglers had caught up with him. The young man couldn't stand it any more...looking at the forlorn eyes of the convicted man. He turned his head, slapping his horse's flanks with the rein ends. He wanted to get out of there, quick. He couldn't help the man...not now.

Bart knew it was the code of Dodge City to leave a horse-thief sitting, if by chance a rider should pass "the cottonwood" and find a Strangler victim with the noose on. Nobody had ever defied that code ...and lived.

Horse-thieves had been known to sit this way for as long as a day and a half, or as little as a few minutes. How long a man sat waiting depended on the faithfulness of his horse and its endurance. If a horse liked its master well enough, it would stay with him until the need for food and water compelled it to leave him. When the animal left it meant death for his master. The horse would walk out from under the man, leaving him to slide off its back and slowly strangle to death at the end of the rope. And the man was left dangling, his boot heels only a foot or so from the ground...depending on how tall the man was and how far the rope stretched.

Today, it isn't known exactly how many horse-thieves in Dodge met this fate on the famous "cottonwood", the hangman's tree known everywhere in the West. The number ran high over a period of years.

But, even so, The Stranglers couldn't wipe out horse-stealing, the most common disease known in the raw, naked West. Horse-thieving continued as long as there were horses to be stolen. And even today, it isn't uncommon to hear of somebody's horse being stolen; only nowadays the penalty for being a horse thief isn't quite so steep.

THE END

"Miss Inez won't have any part of Marvin, Mister!"

SIXGUN WILDCAT

FEATURE RANGELAND NOVEL

by Mat Rand

Someone wanted Wildcat Carlin dead, and Wildcat bein' an accommodatin' gent, Carlin didn't mind playing dead. But that didn't include lyin' down, because Wildcat aimed to get the man who'd thought he'd killed Carlin, and clean out the hidden bandits in this range.

THE DAY was perfect—one of those days of late spring, which New Mexico gives her natives, but not her winter tourists; hot sun, dry air, seven thousand feet up, green-clad mountains towering to snowy summits. The farther country was a tumbling mass of apparent desert mesa upland under a cloudless sky, the foreground a white road, which dipped across cattle runs and streams, seeming to go nowhere in particular.

Only two objects broke the monotony of this foreground—one below, one above. In that little-used road

lay a man on his face, hands outstretched. In the blue sky above circled a buzzard, gradually reconnoitering the scene while descending.

When almost down, the buzzard checked his lazy descent, swirled off at a tangent, and resumed his wide circles. The man had not moved. Near him in the dust lay his hat, punctured on one side with a neat hole, on the other with a ragged tear; beside his head was a dark blotch, rapidly turning black. He wore flannel shirt and overalls, tucked into high boots, which were spurred.

For a moment there was nothing to explain the fear of the buzzard, until, from an arroyo, which ran across the road, a horse and rider mounted into sight. The flea-bitten gray bronc was weary and dejected. The rider was lanky and brown. His blanket-roll, worn leather chaps, and faded shirt told of much sun and wind, as did the weather-wrinkles of his face. It was not a handsome face. Jack Carlin was no Apollo and knew it, but had no quarrel with fate on that account.

Just why Wildcat Carlin was riding into the Los Gatos country by devious ways, instead of following the road that came from San Juan, remained to be seen.

Sighting the man in the dust, he halted, to the enthusiasm of the bronc, and slipped down. His eyes drifted rapidly over the horizon, then he stepped forward and looked down at the dead man. Surprised recognition came into his face. He stirred one outflung hand with his toe. The hand did not move. Carlin took out the makings and rolled a cigarette, his expression puzzled and thoughtful.

"Got shot sometime this morning—pretty stiff already. Hm!" he muttered, and trailed a match across his cuff. He had met this man two days previously in San Juan, and had traded horses with him, being in the horse business. His blue eyes inspected the dust. "Hm! Old Sundown always was gun-shy—he done took to his heels right off. Wonder whether this drifter still has that bill of sale?"

With some effort he inspected the pockets of the dead man—an obscure and out-of-work drifter named Hobbins, going to seek a summer's job in the Los Gatos country. He grunted, and straightened up with the bill of sale he had given Hobbins for his own horse. To this he touched a match, then sat down, smoked, and considered the problem.

He straightened up for a moment as his eye caught a puff of dust half a mile away to the north. Then he swung about and walked rapidly to the arroyo, and plunged down its bank. He stood scrutinizing the vicinity, picked the likeliest spot for an ambush, and approached it. His judgment was not deceived. He caught sight of where a horse had been tethered for some time, and, turning, he gained the crest of the bank above. Here a moment's search showed him several match-ends and cigarette butts ground into the dirt, and to one side the empty brass shell of an exploded cartridge. Carlin rubbed his unshaven chin.

"Hm! I'd half promised poor Hobbins a job," he ruminated, "and anyways I'm sort of innocently responsible. I reckon I'll push this business more or less. Now, then—"

His pulse leaped when he saw a half-emptied sack of tobacco trampled into the earth. He stooped and picked it up. Two initials "G. X." had been heavily penciled on one side.

He clambered over the brink of the arroyo and returned to his waiting horse. That dust-puff from the north had resolved itself into two men and a spare horse, rapidly approaching. Carlin carefully put the salvaged tobacco-sack into his shirt, then began work on another smoke, as he waited.

THE TWO MEN approached. Carlin judged that they had come out from Los Gatos to get the body of the dead man. They drew rein, glowering at him, and dismounted.

"Looks like you get action in this country," he observed, lighting his

fresh cigarette. "How come the killing?"

"Dunno," growled one. "We ain't askin' questions. Stranger here?"

The second man, more cheerful in his looks, tipped Carlin a wink.

"Well, that ain't your business," said Carlin cheerfully. "You say you ain't asking questions, then you ask one! Feller, show me a star when you talk that-a-way."

The man growled something, then beckoned his companion. Between them they lifted the dead man into the saddle, lashed him firmly, then the surly one took the lead rope and mounted. The other jerked his head at Carlin, and waited. "Goin' to town?"

"Hope so, if I can get this bronc started."

Soon Carlin jogged along beside his more amiable companion, while the other rode on ahead with the grotesquely stiff body of Hobbins.

"Tex Winters is me," said the other presently. "Workin' for Marvin, coroner's dep'ty right now. See you got a JY bronc there; used to be up Montana way myself, ten year back."

Carlin nodded. "Yep; thought I'd get me a job in the sunny South. Red Hobbins is me."

"Nothin' much doin' here for cowmen right now," said Tex Winters. "If you was a bronc-peeler you might get on somewhere. Folks around here have gone in for hosses mostly, except a couple of oldtime outfits up the valley that brought a lot o' yacks up from Sonora and rejuvenated the cow business."

"Hoss is my middle name," rejoined Carlin. "What's the best outfit?"

"Marvin's, o' course," and the other grinned. "Well, it's so anyhow, feller! He's the big noise around here. Ain't taking on any hands though. That poor stiff," and he jerked his thumb toward the corpse ahead, "thought as how he'd come in here and buck Johnny Marvin, and that's the end of him. Good man, too, I hear—Wildcat Carlin by name, from somewhere's down below Socorro."

"How'd it happen?" asked Carlin, feeling a lively interest in the affair.

"Accident, most like," said the other dryly. "His hoss was picked up and a feller come in with word he'd found a dead man. Hoss was recognized by the brand. This feller Carlin had been expected. The answer was easy."

"Then who done the accident?"

"Now you're askin' something—but don't go around askin' it promiscuous." Mr. Winters winked significantly. "You see, this feller Carlin—they call him Wildcat Carlin—has a big place down South, rasin' hosses. He's pretty well known by name all over the state, and by all acounts was a hell-raiser."

"Yeah?" queried Carlin. "Never heard of him. Bad man?"

"Nope; jest mean, by all accounts. Him and Marvin got in a jam last year, him claiming some stock Marvin had shipped South was no account. Well, come spring, this feller Carlin bought an interest in the old Gutierrez Rancho that lies up above our outfit—the Dosados, its called, 'count of 'em running two G's back to back for a brand. Marvin, he aimed to grab that place his own self, the old don having promised to sell him them Arab-strain hosses and owin' him money besides; but the old don up an' died, and the senorita had idees of her own. Her and Marvin had a jam or two, likewise. Anyhow, this feller Carlin was fool enough to butt in, and he run into trouble somehow, and there he is."

"Los Gatos ain't a health resort for Marvin's opponents, eh?" said Carlin. "So you got greaser outfits down here, have you?"

"Don't pull that 'greaser' stuff—not around this state!" returned Winters warningly. "It don't go. A Mex is a native here, savvy?"

Carlin grunted. "Free country, ain't it?"

"Nope; the natives run it. You can get a job at the Dosados, I reckon, if you want to work for 'em." Winters chuckled. "Hope you don't. You and me might run up some night in the dark, and I'd hate to collide with that ham you call a fist!"

"It's a good fist." Carlin regarded

his powerful hands while he took careful note of this friendly warning. "Thanks, feller; I get you. All the same, I ain't broke yet, and aim to pick me a real job where the best hosses are. Is that Marvin's brand you're riding?"

THE OTHER nodded, and the conversation lagged. The procession wended on its way, and Wildcat Carlin pondered the interesting fact that he might yet assist at his own funeral.

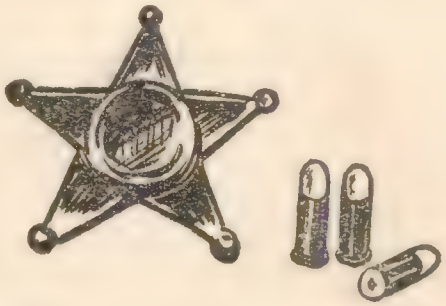
As a matter of fact, he enjoyed his situation. He did not know Johnny Marvin or any one else around Los Gatos personally, but he was thoroughly conversant with the lay of the land. When offered an interest in the Dosados, he had bought it chiefly for the sake of fighting Marvin and the T-In-A-Box—for Marvin wanted the Dosados and its fine strain of horses. He would have had them, too, had old Don Gutierrez lived, for the don always kept his word, for well or ill.

However, the don was gone, and his daughter, the senorita, had no intention of going into business with Johnny Marvin for the latter's benefit. Carlin knew little of the lady except that she needed money to repay the loans Marvin had made the old don. He knew, too, that Marvin had warned off all possible buyers, so that any one that bought into the Dosados did so with full knowledge of the consequences.

Wildcat Carlin being dead, reflected Carlin cheerfully, *it remains to be seen what will now happen. The check has been cashed, so the senorita ain't worried about the money to pay Marvin. By the way Mr. Carlin is being managed right now, it looks to me like the law was considerable primitive in these parts, and anything goes! Guess I'll get me a job an sort o' size things up.*

With this laudable intention, he parted from his companions at the outskirts of town and ambled toward the livery stable.

Los Gatos was a place of some size. Originally a little Spanish settlement beside the river, it still retained the cluster of adobes around the church and plaza. Beyond these, to one side, had grown up the more modern town, with flourishing stores and two hotels. The place rather reminded Carlin of Magdalena, except that here was no railroad.



When he had put up his horse, Carlin shouldered his roll and started up the main street toward the hotel. The town seemed unduly silent and deserted, even for a hot summer afternoon, until Carlin recollected that it was Sunday. Suddenly he stopped, sniffed, and turned in at a small restaurant entitled the Day and Night. Inside the doorway, another man was seated at a table, busily eating.

"Gosh!" said Carlin whimsically. "Thought I was the only jasper who'd missed his dinner today, but we got company; and them eggs certainly do smell like eggs, not to mention the ham. Princess, where can I wash up while you're fixin' me up a platter and coffee?"

This was spoken to a dilapidated waitress, who told him to follow her, and led the way to the kitchen. There Carlin removed some of the travel stains and alkali dust, and then returned to the front of the place. He found the other late diner pushed back from the table, rolling a cigartte with one hand and picking his teeth with the other—a procedure at which Carlin stared with fascinated interest.

The interest was divided between the feat and the man. His first impression was that the fellow was a shifty brute, then he decided not to go by first impressions or by looks, but by later events; for this man was certainly above the average. He was built over-size, and showed

a large expanse of red, sunburned face and neck. He had a broken nose, the jaw of a pugilist, a shock of curly brown hair, and a coldly capable eye that glittered like glass. He surveryed Carlin calmly as the latter took the chair opposite. "Hot day," he said.

"Cool day," said Carlin. "Maybe you folks call it hot, but not me. Give me a patch o' shade on this mesa, and I reckon I'll stick out the summer."

"Yeah, it's cool in the shade. Just struck town?"

"Along with a corpse, a feller named Tex Winters, and a living grouch."

Sudden interest lighted the glassy eyes. "Who's corpse?"

"Shucks! I s'posed the news would be all over town! Somebody named Carlin, I heard."

A slow startled oath escaped the other. He stared at Carlin incredulously. "Not Wildcat Carlin?"

"That's who, according to Winters," and Carlin recounted the story of his "demise." The other man swore again.

"They're keepin' it quiet, that's what! If they—for gosh sake, keep quiet! There she is now—"

THE CAFE door opened. Carlin glanced around, to behold a vision that left him open-mouthed—a girl, tall, slender, dressed in black silk, her face like a cameo in its chiseled delicacy of contour and line. She met his gaze for an instant, then looked at the other man. "Finished, Clonmel? We'll be ready in half an hour. Meet us at the church, will you?"

"Sure, ma'am," said the other, and the vision departed.

"They made a mistake when they named this here town," said Carlin slowly. "Should have called it Paradise. Was I dreaming or not?"

Clonmel laughed. "Nope. Clonmel's my name, general foreman of the Dosados. That there was Miss Gutierrez. She's the boss, since the old don died last fall."

"Oh!" said Carlin. "Red Hobbins is my handle, and I'm glad to meet up with you. Got a place for a good hoss-hand? Peeling broncs is my middle name."

"Hm!" Clonmel studied him for a long moment. The waitress returned and set down the order, with some bread and butter, and then slouched back to the kitchen. Carlin, seemingly entirely occupied with his food, did not fail to note a peculiar gleam in the eyes of the Dosados foreman.

"I'd like to know a heap more about you," said the latter slowly. "Besides that, you come to town with Tex Winters. I got a job to offer, but I ain't offering it promiscuous."

"Fair enough," returned Carlin cordially. "If you've got a job, I'm an applicant; but I don't talk business on Sunday. I'll likely ride out tomorrow or next day and see you. I got a little business here to see to first."

"Oh!" said Clonmel, with a slight sneer. "You're another Sunday shark, are you? Well, it'll make a hit with Miss Inez, if it don't with me. Here I got to hitch up and drive her in to church and what not. Know anybody here in town?"

"Nope, but I want to see this Johnny Marvin. Heard a lot about him."

"Marvin's friends ain't ours," said Clonmel, transfixing Carlin with his glassy eyes. In his look there was an odd significance that puzzled Carlin, and set him to wondering. "You'd better set in to understand the situation 'fore you buy chips. Got business with Marvin? How come you struck me for a job?"

"Why," said Carlin slowly, as a tremendous possibility crossed his mind, "why, Tex Winters allowed you might have one."

"Hm!" Clonmel regarded him from narrowed eyes, then rose and reached for his hat. "Well, I got to mosey along and hitch up. Come on out to the Dosados when you're ready. Miss Gutierrez does the hirin' herself, but I reckon we can fix things up."

"Wait a minute," said Carlin, looking up at the other. "D'you know a feller name of George Crossways who come down this way from Mon-

tana a couple years back? He always spelled his name with an X to save time, and folks used to call him G. X. on account of it."

Clonmel shook his head. "Nope, never heard of him. There's a Garcia Ximinez workin' for the T-In-A-Box —the same initials, only he's a native. Well, so long!"

"So long," repeated Carlin.

He finished his meal, then rolled a smoke and sat thoughtfully.

"It didn't make Clonmel a bit mad when I said that Tex Winters had sent me to him," he reflected; "and there was something mighty queer sitting back of his eyes, something I couldn't savvy. If Clonmel ain't crooked as his own nose, I'll be right glad to apologize! So he never heard of George Crossways, huh? Neither did I."

From his pocket, Carlin dug out a soiled tobacco sack and flopped it around his finger as he studied it. No doubt about those initials. They were meant to be seen.

"Reckon I ought to lay my story before the sheriff," thought Carlin; "but I don't aim to slop over and spill the beans doing it. No, sir! I'll see whom the sheriff's playing hoss with, first. So it was Clonmel tipped off Johnny Marvin about my arrival, huh? Well, we'll see."

2

AT THE Comanche House, Mr. Carlin proceeded to register as *J. Hobbins of Montana.* He left his duffle in a room, sauntered downstairs again to absorb whatever information might be in the air.

There was none in the hotel lobby, which was empty except for two drummers, so he went on out to the street. The first person he saw was his amiable friend, Tex Winters, coming toward him at a rolling gait.

"Jus' the feller I'm lookin' for!" exclaimed Winters, coming to an irresolute halt and grinning amiably. "Le's you and me go find us a drink, Red."

Reflecting that he must now keep his identity as Red Hobbins, the other dissented. "Nope, not me; I'm liable to get wild if I get any booze."

"Well, come 'long anyhow," said Winters, drawing closer and linking arms with "Hobbins." "I'm goin' to make some money for you, feller. You and me's friends. Come 'long."

"Where to?" demanded Carlin.

"Livery stable. Johnny Marvin's there, and he's aiming to buy your li'l gray hoss. I got the deal all fixed up. Come 'long."

"Is that so? I reckon I will come along," said Carlin, and into his gray eyes came a very chilly light. He allowed his friend to pilot him up the street.

In the rear of the stable was a small corral and snubbing post; here, when the two men came up arm in arm, were gathered a dozen persons, and in the forefront the owner of the T-In-A-Box. His appearance was a surprise, but not a disappointment to "Mr. Hobbins of Montana," who had rather expected to find a beefy individual. Instead, Marvin proved to be a tall, gaunt man of perhaps forty. There was no ostentation in his appearance, nor was there any suggestion of crookedness. Wildcat, however, had not expected that his man would be branded across the forehead with the word "Crook"; he had been raised on facts and not on nickle novels.

IN THE corral, besides the gray and a number of other animals, was the horse that had originally belonged to Carlin. There was a general concentration of interest on "Red Hobbins," as he approached, and Tex Winters took full advantage of it.

"Hi, Marvin! Shake hands with m' friend, Red Robbins—I mean, Rob Bebbins—no, dang it all! Hobbins. Red Hobbins. Good feller, he is. Red, meet Johnny Marvin; and here's the gentleman with the shiny star, Sheriff Jackson; and ol' Doc Honeywell, what's the coroner of this here sovereign territory—I mean, state. Dog

gone, I never can get these new-fangled things straightened out, somehow."

"Cut out your hoss and get out to the ranch, Tex," said Marvin coldly, then put out his hand. "Howdy, Hobbins. Ain't been down this way before?"

"Nope, this is my first trip out into the cold world," said Carlin, shaking hands and grinning cheerfully. "Glad to meet you, gents."

The sheriff, a morose man with a bald head and mournful eyes, spoke a word to the coroner, who stepped forward. Doctor Honeywell had a brisk, professional air of forced cheerfulness, and a smirking professional smile that showed a double row of gold dental work. "One word with you, Mr. Hobbins!" he exclaimed. "Just one word, if you please."

"One and only—sure!" assented the new arrival. "You don't need to ask me twice, doc. I can hear a feller whisper the word "whiskey" from a mile away!"

"Tut, tut—you mistake me," said the coroner, as a laugh went up. "I understand that you chanced upon the dead man, Wildcat Carlin, just before the corpse was brought in?"

"Correct, if you mean the corpse out a ways on the San Juan road."

"Well, did he have anything in his pockets, or not?"

Carlin surveyed the coroner thoughtfully, and proceeded to roll a cigarette. "That's a hell of a question!" he responded at length. "Every time you find a feller dead in the road, I s'pose you go right through his pockets to get the leavin's—is that it, doc? Me, I wasn't raised that way, and I ain't used to this country yet."

The coroner lost his smile, turned red, and began to sputter as a roar of laughter went up from the others. He withdrew to the side of the sheriff, who nodded.

"I reckon it's a plain case of murder and robbery by parties unknown, doc. Might's well find that way, anyhow."

"Then," suggested Marvin pointedly, "hadn't you better get out with a posse and see if you can get track of the parties unknown?"

"Reckon so," assented the sheriff mournfully. He departed in the wake of the coroner. Tex Winters, who had been saddling a T-In-A-Box cayuse, bade the party an alcoholic farewell and vanished likewise. There remained Marvin and three others, whom "Mr. Hobbins" took to be T-In-A-Box punchers.

"THAT'S A good gray you're riding, Hobbins," said Marvin. "I'd like to see him in action."

"So would I," agreed the supposed Mr. Hobbins genially. "Yes, sir! Him and me both. If we were in action, now, we'd be drawing down a pay-check and three squares a day."

Marvin frowned slightly. "You don't get me. I may want to buy him."

"Oh!" said Carlin, with a surprised air. "Well, I ain't a mite astonished. He's good."

"Will you limber him up, or shall one of my boys do it?"

Carlin eyed the three punchers and grinned. "Go right ahead, boys, only you'd better tie me up to that snubbin' post first, because I'll sure go after the feller that puts his rope on that gray."

Marvin turned and regarded "Mr. Hobbins" from narrowed eyes. "We can dispense with the funny stuff, Red. I want that horse."

"Nothing to hinder except the United States Constitution and me. You don't get him."

The three punchers guffawed. Marvin flung them a look and a jerk of his thumb, and they hastily departed. Marvin turned to the newcomer.

"I'll pay a fair price for that gray, Hobbins—and it might be healthier for you to sell him. Sheriff Jackson has been thinking that it was queer about you finding the body of Carlin, that way."

His blue eyes bored into Carlin, who lighted his waiting cigarette and broke the match.

"Yes?" Wildcat drawled in response. "According to the looks of the sheriff, thinking is apt to disagree with him; and thinking about me sure will disagree with him."

"You think well of yourself," said Marvin.

"Yeah, I do, come to think of it. I got some reason to."

"How come?"

"Because it's a free country."

Johnny Marvin was not used to being made sport of. His face darkened angrily; but before he could speak, Wildcat Carlin laid a hand on his arm and grinned confidingly.

"Listen here, Marvin, there's no need of getting sore. As for the horse, he goes with me, and I got a job in sight. Maybe it'd pay the both of us to set back and pull together, rather than to get riled up and cussing."

Marvin eyed him speculatively. "I'm listening."

"All right." Carlin shot a glance around as if to make sure they were alone. "Now, here's the way of it. I came from elsewhere, and I lit out of elsewhere quite a good ways ahead of the sheriff, so I may not be traced here; on the other hand, I may. Now, I reckon you got a pull with the local sheriff, and if you were to say a word to him—"

Marvin laughed curtly. "What are you driving at? I may have a little pull; that's natural. At the same time, Jackson wouldn't protect any criminal on my say-so. He ain't my man a-tall. All he wants to do is to hold his job and keep his feet warm and avoid trouble. He's not half the use a pointer pup would be in his boots!"

The note of bitterness in Marvin's voice bespoke his sincerity.

"All right," said Carlin; "but here's the idea—I was talkin' today with a feller name of Clonmel, who's got a job for me if you say the word."

"The double-danged fool!" snapped Marvin, his eyes flashing. "Did he say that?"

"Well, words to that effect, or so I took 'em. Maybe I was mistaken. You see, I'm a plumb stranger in this country and ain't on the hang of things yet."

"Want to sell that gray or not?"

"Me and the bronc stays together."

Marvin's leathery lips twitched in a smile. "You're all right, you are! I don't blame you for not wanting to sell a horse like that. All right. Now what's this about Clonmel? I scarcely know the man, except by sight. All the same, I've heard tales, and if I were you I'd take my orders from Clonmel, and keep my face shut to the senorita. It won't do you any good to have a word from me. That's all bosh. Tell Clonmel you've seen me, if you want; but I can't see why the devil he sent you to me."

Carlin puffed reflectively. He did not miss the significant undernote of this speech, and at its conclusion he nodded.

"Maybe I clear mistook him, Marvin. Well, so long! See you later, maybe."

He left the corral, passed the three punchers in the livery stable, and sauntered out to the street. There he started back to the hotel, and grinned to himself.

"Johnny Marvin, you're one slick hombre!" he reflected. "Looks to me like I've got a trail to follow, sure enough. The question is to see what it leads to. My first job is to get a letter off to old Mac, before he starts in to collect my insurance and liquidate my estate. It won't do to trust the wires."

REACHING the hotel he procured some writing paper at the desk and turned into the little room used for correspondence, which he found empty. There he settled

down to indite a letter to Mac, his foreman down South. He did not go into details however.

> If you get word that I'm dead, wire to dispose of the corpse any way that's decent, and pay the expenses; but don't go any farther, until I corroborate the report.
>
> Don't send on any mail to me, either. Drop a line to J. Hobbins, care of the Dosados, to the effect that he's a good horse-hand and bronc-peeler, and enclose a certified check for five hundred dollars drawn to his name. Then give Sallie Carter his time and traveling expenses and tell him to get up here in a hurry and bring his gun and my extra one. Tell him to ask for J. Hobbins, otherwise known as Red, at the Dosados. Then sit pretty and forget the obituary notices.
>
> J. Carlin.

Wildcat had addressed and stamped his letter, and was wiping his fingers on the blotter when the door opened to admit Sheriff Jackson. He flipped over the letter so that the address could not be read, and uttered a surprised exclamation.

"Well, well! I thought you were out sleuthing on the trail of that corpse!"

"I want a word with you first," said the sheriff, closing the door and eyeing "Mr. Hobbins" with evident suspicion.

"Loose the word," said Carlin.

"I'd kinda like to know somethin' about you," said the sheriff.

Carlin evinced enthusiasm. "You and I are agreed! The more I know about myself, the happier I am. Let's go into the matter together, sheriff, by all means."

"You may think you're funny, but you ain't," said the other coldly. "I want to know where you come from, what you're workin' at, and who for."

"Oh!" Carlin finished rolling a cigarette and lighted it. "Let's see the search warrant."

"Search warrant? What for?"

Carlin rose, and his amiable expression vanished suddenly—so suddenly, in fact, that the sheriff took a hasty step backward.

"What do you think this is? Who gave you any permission to walk in here and ask me questions? My affairs are none of your ding-danged business, so stick that in your pipe and smoke it!"

"See here, I'm the sheriff o' this county—"

"And I'm just as good a citizen as you are, maybe better! Being a sheriff gives you no license to spout around other people. You're here to serve the county, not to make yourself a nuisance—get it into your bald head. and get it there to stay!"

"What the hell are you anyhow—a lawyer?" sneered the other. "I think you'll do to cool off a spell in the jail, mister."

"It must be a novel experience," said Carlin reflectively.

"What?"

"Thinking."

A flush crept into the sheriff's morose countenance. "You'll get fresh, eh? Just for that, you come along."

His hand jerked slightly toward his gun.

"Try it!" said Carlin. "Just try it, you big windbag—and I'll put three bullets into you before you can draw!"

"Dang it, you're under arrest for carryin' concealed weapons!" shrilled the sheriff.

"That don't make it so. If you want to arrest me, go get your warrant, then come and serve it. And if I haven't got a gun on me, you'll be laughed out of town. None of your high-handed stuff goes with me for a minute. Get out of here, and get out quick, before I plant my toe in your pants and kick you out. Vamose!"

THE SHERIFF fumbled for the doorknob, and retreated. Carlin followed him out into the office, with a parting shot.

"Come again, sheriff, come again. Always glad to instruct you in the duties of your office! Be sure to bring a warrant if you want to do any arresting; and remember that you're just a plain ordinary cuss like the rest of us, and that star of yours doesn't make you into a gold-crowned potentate. Run along, now, and think it over once or twice."

The sheriff departed to the street.

Carlin caught a snicker, and turned to see the hotel proprietor grinning at him. Before the cigar counter was a dark man, obviously a native—a swarthy, handsome fellow, flashily attired. He flashed a quick glance at Carlin, and then left the hotel.

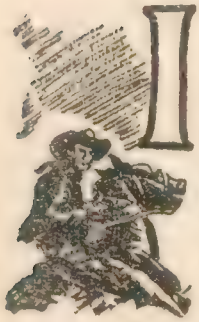
"You sure believe in stickin' up for your rights, eh?" said the proprietor genially. "Poor old sheriff! Dawged if he didn't look like a b l o o d h o u n d what had been whipped!"

"Well, I'm free, white, and just turned twenty-one," replied Carlin, "which is more than your recent customer can say. Who was he?"

"Him? Oh, a puncher in town over Sunday," was the careless reply. "Feller named Ximinez—works for the T-In-A-Box outfit. An artist with a gun, they say."

Wildcat Carlin mailed his letter.

3



IN THE early sunlight, the man known as Red Hobbins rode out of Los Gatos with a large-scale county map in his pocket, a cheery whistle on his lips, and more or less anticipation in his heart. To tell the truth, his glimpse of Senorita Inez Gutierrez had knocked his scheme of things into a cocked hat. He had come up from the South for the sole reason of bucking Johnny Marvin; but now he began to think less about Marvin and more about his partnership in the Dosados.

He jogged along a deserted road until the morning was half gone, and he came to a fork. A rude sign post was erected here, with a board on which was burned the Double G brand of the Dosados, with an arrow pointing to the left fork, and the legend *5 Mi.* Carlin dutifully turned to the left, surveying the rolling countryside and the distant hills that encircled the valley with a satisfied eye, until he had covered a mile of the five that remained.

Then he became aware of a wagon in the road ahead, and a very fat young man reclining against the off front wheel thereof, enjoying a cigarette. Scattered tools on the ground showed that the corpulent youth had been laboring. He looked up as Carlin drew near, and nodded.

"Howdy," he said. "I seen you in town yesterday. Goin' to the Dosados?"

"I hope so," said Carlin cheerfully. "This road go there?"

"Sure do, and a heap of other places. I aim to get there in time for dinner, if I get my deliveries made. Goin' out to see Miss Gutierrez?"

Carlin laughed, for he was amused by the guileless curiosity of the fat youth, who he guessed was making deliveries for the general store in town.

"Nothing else to see, is there?" he returned. The fat one sighed heavily.

"I s'pose not. You're like all the rest, dawg-gone it! Every time I go out there calling, some jasper eases himself along from the next county."

"Huh?" said Carlin. "What's the answer?"

"Oh, shucks!" retorted the other, with lazy contempt. "You ain't so durned innercent. Every feller goin' out to the Dosados puts on a clean silk handkerchief and his slickest outfit. But every durned time I start out this way, something happens to this old wreck. Look at me, would ye! Dirt off that dad-blamed wheel—dirt and grease all over me! And there ye are, all slicked up to go courtin'."

Wildcat grinned, perceiving the truth. It was also a fact that he had donned a clean 'kerchief and had obtained an exceedingly close shave that morning.

"You're wrong, feller," he exclaimed, rolling a smoke. "Me, I'm courting a job, and I sure hope I get it!"

"That the truth?" demanded the fat one, looking up and opening his mouth to gape.

"Sober truth. I never met the lady, but from all I hear she's the real article. So you're sort of stuck on her yourself, are you?"

"That don't express it," said the fat youth, and sighed again. "Mister, I'd do 'most anything for her! So would you, after you know her. So would any one."

Carlin trailed a match off his cuff and lighted up. "Maybe so. You got hopes, have you? Well, I don't aim to spoil 'em none, so here's wishin' you good luck, feller."

"Thanks," returned the other earnestly. "Well, I ain't got anything definite, for a fact, but like you say, I got hopes. The old don never let nobody come courtin', and since he died she don't cotton much to them that do. I reckon she thinks as high of me as of anybody around here. Folks say that Johnny Marvin aims to get his rope on her, but I'll bet a dollar he don't do it in a hurry. Why, I done heard her tell Marvin to his face, right there in the store, that he was a crook! So that don't look like it, huh?"

"Not much," said Wildcat thoughtfully. "So she don't like Marvin, eh?"

"None a-tall; and there's others that don't." The fat youth scowled belligerently He's too dawggoned anxious to ride folks, he is! Thinks he owns the whole county, just because he's got money. Well, I reckon I'd better get along."

"Need any help?"

"Nope, thanks. All done. See you later, maybe."

IT WAS not surprising that the Senorita Inez was a much-sought-after girl, and it cheered Wildcat amazingly to discover that so far, as the fat youth had put it, no one had got his rope on the senorita.

So she called Marvin a crook, did she? reflected Carlin, and grinned at the thought. *She ain't likely to marry him, then.*

He figured that he must have covered most of the four remaining miles, and was watching a heavily wooded line of creek ahead, among rolling hills, for some sight of the Dosados, when dust puffed over the rise ahead and a horseman came riding hard toward him. Carlin jogged along steadily, and presently recognized the countenance of Clonmel, who came dashing up with a hand-wave, and drew rein harshly. Carlin remarked to himself that this was no way to handle horses, but kept his thoughts private.

"Howdy," he returned the other's greeting. "What's your rush?"

Clonmel eyed him, and then nodded soberly.

"You. The store boy came along and mentioned meeting you, and as I was starting out for the south pasture, I came this way."

"Yeah," said Carlin, giving no sign of his inward astonishment at such solicitude from a ranch foreman—not to mention the labored explanation.

"Did you see Marvin?" shot out the other.

"Him and me had quite a talk yesterday." Carlin chuckled. "Yes, sir, we got real well acquainted, for a fact! He seemed to think that you were a durned sight too free with your talk, and would have to be more careful."

"What?" exclaimed Clonmel sharply. "He said that?"

"Well, maybe not in so many words. Anyhow, he seemed to think we'd get on well enough, so I come on out. What wages you paying?"

Clonmel was no longer in a hurry, and rolled a cigarette as he talked wages. Then, when his man was hired, he gave Carlin a look from those cold and glassy eyes.

"If I was you," he said, "I'd say nothin' to Miss Gutierrez beyond the fact that I'd sent you along. She does the hirin' on my say-so, so you got to handle her right."

"Sure; I get you. I guess the se-

norita won't bother me none, either."

"Cut out that senorita talk," said Clonmel sharply. "Most of the boys are natives, but the old don was strong on the American stuff. He wouldn't let anybody talk Mex on the place, so far as work went. Off work, it's all right. Get me?"

"Yep. I don't aim to do any talking anyhow." Carlin grinned. "Not after what that Ximinez got from Johnny Marvin yesterday! He sure caught hell."

"Ximinez?" Clonmel's eyes widened.

"Uh-huh. Seems like he had a drink and done some bragging. What about, I dunno. Marvin pitched into him proper. 'You and Clonmel both alike,' he says."

Clonmel scowled over his broken nose. "He did, did he? Well, no matter; it's nothing to me. Run along and mind what you say to Miss Gutierrez, and don't call her "the senorita' again. She's got a couple o' visitors and ain't feeling none too amiable, so mind your step."

CLONMEL nodded and departed. "Mr. Hobbins" continued his jog, but as he slowly mounted the rise ahead, he glanced back and grinned after the dusty wake of Clonmel.

"You sure went out of your way to warn me against sayin' too much!" he muttered, and slapped his thigh delightedly.

Minutes later, as he neared the crest of the rise, two riders cut the skyline and came toward him. Then he remembered the two visitors Clonmel had mentioned. At first Carlin did not know them, but on closer approach, he recognized, in one, a puncher that had been with Johnny Marvin the day before; and in the other, shod of his Sunday finery and looking much more at home in working garb, Garcia Ximinez.

"Howdy, boys," said Carlin amiably, as they nodded to him. "I don't s'pose, by any chance, one of you could be Garcia Ximinez? You got T-In-A-Box hosses, I see."

"That's me," said the swarthy native, scowling suspiciously. "What you want?"

"Got a message for you from Clonmel," returned Carlin, and grinned at the other. "You don't mind if we take a *pasear* for a couple o' minutes? I'm supposed to give this message in private, or so Clonmel said."

He turned the gray and rode back a few steps, Ximinez accompanying him, the third man sitting on his horse and rolling a smoke. Out of earshot, Carlin drew rein.

"Here's the dope, Ximinez. Have you lost a tobacco sack with your initials on it?"

He looked into the swarthy features as he spoke, and the native changed countenance.

"Me? A tobacco sack? Me, I dunno. What sort of message is this?"

"Here's the rest of it," said Carlin grimly. "An inquisitive hombre found that sack in a gully, near where that feller Carlin was killed yesterday. He found some other things, too—I ain't right sure what; but the sack had your initials. This jasper, he done turned 'em all over to the sheriff, and somehow they found out that Clonmel had put Johnny Marvin wise about Carlin's coming here, and found that you were gone from the T-In-A-Box all day yesterday, and didn't get into town until late in the morning. So there you are."

A pallor leaped into the swarthy

face at these words. Abruptly wheeling, the gray Carlin went back to where the other puncher was waiting. He heard a choked cry from behind him, then a wrathful Mexican oath, and Ximinez lifted an angry question.

"Who is that inquisitive hombre? You tell me quick! Who is he?"

"Me," said Carlin.

An exclamation of astonishment burst from the other puncher. Ximinez stared at Carlin for an instant, then a flood of fury swept into his face. Almost without warning, his hand leaped to his pocket, and he fired without drawing weapon.

CARLIN waited nearly too long. He had been hoping for this very thing, but had not expected so swift a shot, and as he ducked in his saddle the hat was swept from his head with two ragged tears in the felt. Then his own pistol spoke once, and Ximinez toppled forward over his saddle-horn.

"By gosh, I had to do it!" said Carlin in an awed voice. "Partner, you seen him go for me—and all because of a little joke! Can you beat it? I never knew a feller to take a joke so hard before. Anyhow, you seen what happened."

The other puncher stared from "Hobbins" to the dead man. "By Godfrey! I guess you're right—but what was this here joke?"

"Why I was telling Ximinez that the sheriff was after him for killing that hombre out on the San Juan road yesterday. Clonmel, he done said to tell that to Ximinez and see what happened; but, by gosh! who'd have thought he'd go for me?"

"Clonmel said that, huh?" remarked the other man in a tone that signified Mr. Clonmel was due for trouble. Then he checked himself and gave Hobbins a sharp look. "Who in hell are you anyhow?"

"Peelin' broncs for the Dosados—just hired—Red Hobbins by name." Wildcat Carlin waxed confidential, pulled the marked tobacco sack from his pocket, and turned it over to the other man. "You see, partner, Clonmel done rode out yesterday to where that Carlin feller was killed. He found this there. Well, he passed it to me, saying to put up a joke on Ximinez, the initials being the same; and, like a born fool, I done so, and you seen what come of it—this here son sure went for me!"

"You had to stop him," agreed the other, and hastily thrust the tobacco sack into his pocket. "You're right in one thing. You sure are a born fool! Well, I'll take Garcia home, I s'pose. It's got to be done. You're luckier than you know, cowboy. This hombre had a reputation with a gun! You're lucky two ways—lucky that he didn't get you, and lucky that you got a clear case of self-defense. A fool for luck every time."

"I guess so," said Carlin. "Want me to help you tie him in the saddle?"

They dismounted and adjusted the mortal remains of Ximinez, and presently Wildcat Carlin was again riding up to the crest of the hill. The merry twinkle had died out of his eyes, and the careless recklessness from his bearing. He seemed suddenly weary and despondent.

"Yet I had to do it!" he murmured. "Just plain had to do it—because if it hadn't been for me, that poor devil Hobbins would never have been murdered! And the sheriff would have done nothing with that evidence; nothing!"

Carlin bucked up, walked the gray over the rise, and saw the Dosados Rancho ahead.

4

WHY HAD those two T-In-A-Box riders visited the Dosados? What business had they with Miss Gutierrez? These questions remained at the back of Wildcat Carlin's head as he approached the rancho.

It was a fine old place, built in the Spanish-Mexican style, which has survived in New Mexico alone,

of all the Southwest. Set amid pinones and silvery-leaved aspens, the main building was of solid adobe, built around a patio, with wide first-floor galleries all around, the projecting *vigas* and posts heavily carved. Some distance away, and ranging along the creek, were other buildings—bunk-houses and barns, a large corral, a windmill creaking dismally and making an incongruous modern note.

Before the house stood the wagon Carlin had encountered, and its corpulent driver, rosy-cheeked and cleansed of grease and dirt, stood nonchalantly regarding the scene. Five swarthy punchers, all natives, surveyed the newcomer with half-suspicious glances as he approached the house. They evidently had been conferring with Miss Gutierrez, who stood in the doorway, likewise watching "Hobbins." The latter saw no signs of the unamiable disposition of which Clonmel had warned him. The young woman looked very cool and capable, and was attired in faded khaki. Masses of bronze hair were coiled about her head in sharp contrast to the delicate features and pink-and-white skin below, while her dark-blue eyes regarded him with a half-worried, half-puzzled expression.

"That's him," said the fat youth, and waved his hand at Carlin. "Just got here in time for dinner, mister! By golly, where'd you get them holes in your hat? Didn't have none when I met ye on the road."

Carlin ignored the question, swung to earth, and removed his hat as he came forward.

"You're Miss Gutierrez? My name is Hobbins," he said. "I know quite a bit about horses, and I've been talking job with your foreman. He sent me along to see you."

"Very well, Mr. Hobbins," said the girl, smiling. "We'll talk about it after dinner. Billy, show him where to wash, and where to put up his horse, will you?"

The fat youth bestirred himself. "Sure! Come right along, Red."

"Red it is." Carlin chuckled. "Thank you, ma'am!"

He departed with Billy, leading the gray, which he turned into the corral. While he was hanging up his saddle and roll, Billy lighted a cigarette and gave voice.

"Where'd you get them holes in your hat, huh?"

"Snakebite," said Carlin whimsically. "Flying snake."

"Huh," grunted the fat one skeptically. "Say, did ye meet two T-In-A-Box punchers?"

Carlin nodded silently, and the other continued.

"They've raised sand here, for a fact! Seems like a feller from down South had bought shares in this ranch, and was on his way here, and he was killed outside town on the San Juan road. Them punchers rode over with the news, and now Miss Inez, she's got to have the feller buried. Well, you want to slick up? Here's the pump over here."

TEN MINUTES later, Carlin returned to the group at the house, and at his approach there was an evident abandonment of discussion. Quite oblivious of this, he rolled a cigarette and gave the senorita a twinkling glance.

"Well, ma'am, this is a right smart place, for a fact! Good hoss country too. Fine spell of weather too. By the way, Clonmel seemed in considerable of a hurry for this time of day. Heading for town?"

"Yes, on business," said the girl, and introduced him to the native riders. This was what "Mr. Hobbins" had wanted to know, and he felt satisfied. Clonmel had gone to wire South about the death of "Carlin"; and old Mac, getting this letter about the same time, would handle things all right.

A bell was beaten vigorously, and Carlin made the acquaintance of Tia Manuela, the cook, and her daughter, wife of one of the riders. Since the death of the old don, and in the absence of "company," there was one table laid for all, in the garden patio. Hobbins did not wonder greatly at this custom, since he found the native riders all courteous and well-mannered men. They spoke as good English as Carlin himslf, were quite as thorough-going Americans, and

asked no odds of anyone, when it came to work. All this would have been astonishing to a stranger, but Wildcat Carlin had lived in New Mexico most of his life and took it as a matter of course. He found himself sitting half-way down the long table, at the head of which was Miss Inez. At the foot sat a stone-deaf lady of antique appearance—a distant relative, who had come to live with the girl at the death of the old don.

Fat Billy, sitting opposite Carlin at table, plied the latter with questions; at length Billy reverted to his now favorite topic.

"What about them holes in your hat, anyhow? No flyin' snake could make them, Red. What did?"

Carlin chuckled. "A flying snake, just like I said. It was a lead snake."

The fat boy's eyes opened wide. "What? You mean a bullet? Somebody shot at you?"

"Well, that's a hard one to answer. If anybody shot at me, I'd likely have been hit. Most likely, he took a shot at my hat, just to see if his hand was in right."

"By golly! Who done it, since I met you on the road, huh?"

There was a dead silence. The unconcerned air of "Mr. Hobbins" was puzzling to those around, who were not sure whether he was joking or in earnest.

"Why, Billy, the foul deed was done by a gentleman just over the brow of yonder hill, maybe half a mile from here."

"By golly, I told you folks I heard a shot!" ejaculated the corpulent one excitedly. "Who done it?"

Carlin looked up, met the gravely intent gaze of Miss Gutierrez, and flashed her a smile. "Oh, a feller on a T-In-A-Box hoss. Juan, please give me the butter, will you?"

Juan obliged. Miss Gutierrez, however, spoke up sharply. "Do you mean that? Did one of those men shoot at you?"

"Yes'm," said Carlin. "You'll sure have to overlook it if I make inroads on this bread and butter, ma'am. It's the best I've—"

"Which one of them?" demanded the girl. Carlin glanced up. "Which one? Oh, the dark one. Ximinez, I think his name was."

"Ximinez!" A startled look came into the girl's face, and was reflected in the darker faces around. "You're sure? He meant to do it?"

Carlin grinned. "Yes'm, he was right riled up when I mentioned that tobacco sack."

"What on earth are you talking about?" exclaimed the girl. "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

Carlin looked up in surprise. "Why, ma'am, how'd I know it would interest you-all?"

She made an impatient gesture. "Tell me at once what happened! What tobacco sack are you talking about?"

"Why the one I found where that feller was killed on the San Juan road, yesterday morning—Carlin, they said his name was. You see, ma'am, the sack had the initials G. X. penciled on it. I thought Ximinez might be right interested in hearing—"

A gasp broke from the girl, and her eyes widened. "You mean—you found it there! And you never told anyone about it?"

Carlin reached for another slice of bread. "Well, I done had an argument with the sheriff yesterday afternoon, and had to kick him out of the hotel, so I didn't judge I'd trouble him none. So it's all attended to now, and no more fuss. You see, that other T-In-A-Box puncher had to allow that Ximinez went after me with his gun, and there couldn't be any argument about it—"

Miss Gutierrez came to her feet. "I'll see about this sort of thing going on here!" she exclaimed, anger sparkling in her eyes. "I'm going to ride over and tell Marvin what I think of him, and if he doesn't take that fellow Ximinez to jail—"

"Now, ma'am, don't get all excited and spoil a good dinner!" exclaimed Carlin. "There's nothing to get het up about. Tia Manuela D'you suppose I could have another cup of coffee, if it ain't all gone? I'd sure appreciate it. Now, ma'am, about Ximinez, don't you waste another thought on him. He won't bother

you any more. I expect Doc Honeywell will be riding out tomorrow to get the inquest all straight."

"Will you tell me what happened?" demanded the girl coldly.

"Yes'm," Carlin grinned. "Ximinez shot too high, that's all—and I didn't."

THERE WAS an instant of silence, until the import of his words sank in. *"Madre de dios!"* broke from one of the men. "He has killed Ximinez!"

"Not much," said Carlin. "It was a plain case of suicide, just as that other puncher said. If you go shoot at another gent, and make this mistake of missing him, what's that but suicide? Now, Billy, look what you've gone and done with your fool questions—got everybody all worked up over nothing, and Miss Guiterrez forgetting this elegant apple-sauce and me having to talk along when I should have been eating! Billy, you talk too blamed much with your mouth. Don't forget that curiosity killed the cat."

The girl flashed him a cold look. "Either you're trying to be dramatic and only being silly, or—or—"

"It's the other thing, ma'am," Carlin promptly assured her.

"When you've finished your dinner, come into the office, please," she said, and departed.

When she had left the patio, there was a general outburst of questions and exclamations, to all of which Carlin shook his head. He was aware that the attitude of the men around him had changed. Now they were exultant, delighted, and openly astonished. He only grinned at them, winked at the gaping Billy, then shoved back his chair and arose.

"Juan, be a good feller and show me where the office is. Thanks."

Following the rider, he was shown to a door at the rear of the patio, and knocked. The voice of the girl bade him enter.

IT WAS a plain room, this office, with nothing much beyond a flat-topped desk and a bookcase and some hair-hide-seated chairs for furniture. On the walls hung a number of weapons, and a mounted grizzly's head. At the desk sat the girl, and Carlin conjectured from her reddened eyes that she had not expected him so soon.

"Sit down—smoke if you want to," she said, and leaning on her elbows, regarded him across the desk.

"Now we can talk," he said quietly. "I had to watch my words out there, because that delivery boy is going to spread a lot of talk, and I want him to spread the right kind. First, I'd like to have your assurance that our conversation will not be repeated to Clonmel."

"What do you mean? Mr. Clonmel is my foreman."

"That's just the point. Jack Carlin informed no one but you, Miss Gutierrez, just when he expected to reach Los Gatos—but Ximinez was waiting for him."

She paled. "I don't like that, Mr. Hobbins. How do you know so much about Mr. Carlin? Just who are you?"

"A friend of Carlin's. Now, will you give me the assurance I want? Then I'll go ahead."

"Very well," she said, and leaned back in her chair. Carlin rolled a smoke.

"Miss Gutierrez, when Carlin started this way he expected trouble. I came with him, but was delayed at San Juan, so that he came on alone from there. One of his best men, Carter, will be along in a few days. If you'll allow us, we'll look out for Carlin's interests here, and yours too. Naturally, we want our activities unsuspected, and if you'll not resent our presence as an impertinence—"

"Why, of course not!" she exclaimed warmly; "but we'll have to talk plainly, Mr. Hobbins. I'll not permit any slurs against my men, particularly against my foreman."

"All right; I'll come to that in a minute," said Carlin briskly. "Now, I know the general situation up here, but not the details. Please tell me what trouble there is between the Dosados and Johnny Marvin."

"There's a map of the range on the door behind you," she said, and Carlin turned. "You see, all the west and north side of this valley is held by my—our—range and that of the T-In-A-Box. Originally, it was all part of the old Spanish grant to my father's people, about three hundred years ago. There is no trouble between the two outfits, exactly; but there is bad feeling. My father sank a lot of money in horses of Arab strain, had to borrow from Marvin, and mortgaged the stock. He gave Marvin to understand that the two outfits might be combined under Marvin's direction. Then my father died very suddenly last fall from heart disease."

SHE PAUSED an instant. "I know from my correspondence with Mr. Carlin that he had some grudge against Marvin. I dislike Marvin for reasons that—that are personal." She hesitated, and a little flush stole into her cheeks. Wildcat felt that he could quite understand her reasons. "I refused to let the combination go through, and as Marvin demanded payment of his loans, I had to sell an interest in the place, without delay. Mr. Carlin was very well spoken of by the Stockmen's Association and others, so I put through the deal with him by mail, as he accepted my valuations without demur. I paid Marvin, and the matter was ended. That is the whole situation to date."

"Hm! I wonder whether it is?" mused Carlin reflectively, trying to recollect a chance remark of Tex Winter's. "Marvin still wants those horses, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"He's not so rich as he was—lost a lot of money lately, because he's tried to put over some more or less crooked deals," said Carlin. "Nothing outside the law, but just plain business as some folks regard it. As a matter of fact, he has to get a better strain of stock or quit, and getting it is going to cost a lot of money, if he bought it. He could steal it, or marry it, of course."

She met his steady gaze, and smiled slightly. "Yes, he might—if he could."

"I'm mighty glad he can't marry it," Carlin laughed; "but can he steal it?"

"I don't think so. Clonmel and my father were the only ones that managed the business. I didn't know much about it. We haven't had a count of the stock yet. It's to be made this week, or was. Clonmel says that we have about three thousand head in all, good and bad, and the men bear this out. About five hundred, including foals, are of the Arab strain."

Wildcat nodded, his eyes narrowing speculatively. "Uh-huh! That's Clonmel's say-so. Did your father leave any figures?"

"No; and now, please, explain your animus against Clonmel."

Carlin smoked thoughtfully, then disposed of his cigarette in an ashtray on the desk.

"It's my opinion that he's working with Johnny Marvin. He sent Marvin word just when Carlin would arrive. He wouldn't hire me until I'd seen Marvin, so I had a talk with Marvin yesterday. Nothing explicit; but a tacit understanding that I'm to take orders from Clonmel and not from you. Billy brought in word that I was coming this morning. Clonmel recognized his description of me and rushed off to town, presumably to wire Carlin's people of his death, in reality to warn me to keep my mouth shut to you about Marvin."

At these last words, the girl's startled indignation gave place to thoughtful retrospection. She frowned. "It can't be possible! Have you any proof?"

"Not ready for that yet. Why should Clonmel be working against you?"

"I can't imagine. The rancho is a stock organization, incorporated. Father wanted to do everything on the American plan, you know. Clonmel owns some of the stock—not much, but enough to make all his interest center in the success of things here."

"Well, suppose we let things ride, and see." Carlin rose, and before his smile, the girl's frown vanished. He put out his hand across the desk. "You give me a job and send me out for a couple of days to the upper end of the range, and see what turns up at this end. Is it a bargain?"

"It's a bargain," she said, and gave him a firm grip; "and—thank you for coming!"

"Thank you for being here," he responded. For a moment their eyes met; and Wildcat Carlin knew that all was well.

5

WATCH Clonmel; and don't give him a chance to get into touch with Marvin!"

With this parting injunction to Miss Inez, Wildcat Carlin had left the Dosados. He rode off in company with Juan Alvarado, on orders to inspect the fences along the upper end of the range and to count the head in that section. This being no short job, they took blankets and enough grub for two days.

The second evening found them camped among pinones in a small canon. This northern end of the ranch, an immense tract that ranged for miles along the valley, ran into bad and rough ground—sandy canons, abrupt and broken hills, with the snowy peaks of the Cargadores range towering beyond. The T-In-A-Box territory also sent up a long wedge-shaped strip, the dividing line of fence being only half a mile to the eastward of the camp in the canon.

Carlin found his companion a quiet, efficient, unimaginative man, highly reliable and at first taciturn, but soon unbending upon discovering that Carlin could converse fluently in Spanish. With the first night's camp, they were friends. At the same time, neither man brought up the subject of Marvin and trouble, nor did Carlin drop any hint of his suspicions anent Clonmel.

These suspicions were by no means allowed to rest. Alvarado stated, with a shrug, that little work had been done since the previous fall, except to take care of the stock that was not sheltered in the upper valleys; thus, the fences along this section were in shocking disrepair. Clonmel had been in full charge of things, however, since before the old don's death, virtually running the ranch to suit himself until Miss Inez took hold. As for the stock, this seemed to be present and accounted for; but Wildcat Carlin believed that he had already hit upon the game that was being played by Marvin and Clonmel.

"How long have you been with the outfit?" he asked Juan, as they sat looking at the stars the second evening.

"Five years, senor," came the soft response.

"The other boys, too?"

"Oh, no!" Alvarado laughed. "When the old don—may he rest with the saints!—died, I was away at Albuquerque, selling some horses. Most of the other vaqueros had been with the old don many years. There was trouble while I was gone, and they quit. These boys have been with us since the fall, only."

"Oh!" said Carlin. "Clonmel ran 'em off, did he?"

Juan Alvarado laughed. "I don't know. I take no part in quarrels, for I have a wife and two nino's. It is not my business to seek trouble."

Carlin grinned at this evasion, and did not press the subject.

"Now, just why," he queried, exhaling a cloud of smoke, "would a ranch foreman let all his fences go to smash this way—especially in country like this up here?"

Alvarado shrugged. *"Quien sabe?*

There will be a roundup now, in two or three weeks."

"Sure; a big remuda's in sight. I ain't seen many slickers today, Juan. Don't you figure there ought to be more? or is our outfit and the T-In-A-Box waiting for the roundup to come off, and then divvy up?"

"It is hard to say," responded the other slowly.

At this instant, a shot startled them. Carlin stamped out his cigarette and leaped up. "Who's shooting coyotes, huh? That wasn't so far from here, Juan!"

"No; in Pagar Canon, I think—north of here. Less than half a mile, was it not?"

"Any ranchers around here?"

"No."

"If it's that close, let's walk over and see. Maybe it's some one trying to attract our attention, and maybe it isn't. Have you a gun?"

"Yes."

"Then lead the way to your Pugar Canon, if you know where it is."

They set off together, mounting the sidehill of the canon and gaining the upland beyond, where there was less timber. The moon was not yet up, but the starlight was brilliant and clear, the rarified atmosphere redoubling its effect. Within five minutes, Alvarado declared that he could make out the reflection of a fire, though Carlin could see nothing.

"Come down to the other canon. It is all sand there," said Juan.

HE LED the way, explaining that the canon ahead was a blind one, ending in blank rocks. The upper end, a mile distant, received drainage from the hills around and accordingly had a heavy stand of grass which attracted most of the loose stock in this end of the range. The lower canon, however, was dry and sandy and inhabited chiefly by tumblebugs.

"Hm!" grunted Wildcat, "and instead of keepin' up his fences, Clonmel leaves 'em go so all the neighbors' stock can enjoy that place, huh? Lead on."

Careful to avoid brush, he followed Alvarado's lead. Meantime, his thoughts were busy.

Carlin slipped down the long sideslope of a canon, and presently found himself on sandy ground, which became loose and shift-sand farther on. Up the canon he could now see the light of a small fire. None the less, he touched Alvarado's arm and breathed a question that seemed singularly inappropriate at such a moment.

"Tell me something, hombre! How come Marvin uses that T-In-A-Box brand? Where'd he get it? Start it up himself?"

Juan swore softly, but answered the query. "No; a man named Ollie Taylor used to own the ranch. Marvin bought it some years ago, the brand with it. Now, in the name of the saint, is there any more information you want?"

Carlin grinned. "Nope; I got all I need to know—and I bet I know just what's ahead of us—two of them T-In-A-Box boys and a bottle of acid and a slickear foal! You circle around to come on 'em from above, *sabe?* Make any play you like, and leave me to back it up. Go on!"

Thus forced into taking the initiative, Alvarado hesitated and then slipped away. Mr. Carlin quietly worked his way up the sandy floor of the canon, approaching the twinkling fire with all the awkwardness and noise of a phantom. The wind brought him a smell of coffee, at which he wrinkled his nose appreciatively, then with this another and sharper smell that was by no means so pleasant.

Acid. Sure hit it right! he thought exultantly.

HE WAS not long in making out the meaning of the shot. Two men were at work, over what apparently was a dead horse. Close by stood a foal, watching and wondering. Close beside the little fire was the large body of a rattler, still twitching convulsively, with the head blown off. Disturbed at their labors, and over-confident of their lonely situation, the two men had

not hesitated to use a bullet on the reptile.

"That's about right, ain't it?" asked one of the two, straightening up. "We got to use it weak. It'll take six or seven days anyhow to set. Suit you?"

"I reckon," assented the other. "Leave the mare be awhile. Let's swaller that coffee and wait till the moon comes up. We don't want to scare them hosses in the upper pasture. This is the last bit o' work to put over, so we want to make her good. Twenty bucks per hoss will clean us up quite some money tonight."

The two men rose, stretched, lighted cigarettes, and then stiffened. From the hillside above them came the click of a gun-hammer, and a soft voice.

"Los manos arriba, senores! Stick 'em up, *pronto!"*

Caught thus suddenly and beyond evasion, the two men were paralyzed into momentary obedience. Then desperate comprehension smote them, and they leaped asunder, one kicking the fire apart, the other diving down to earth and opening fire. His pistol-shots pulsated in the night, and then ceased suddenly, as Alvarado fired twice from above.

The first fled in the darkness. Carlin remained where he was, gun out, but unused, until an instant later came a burst of shots directed at Alvarado, and then the pounding hoofs of a horse. With a chuckle. Wildcat rose up and fired twice at the dark shape rushing straight for him. The horse screamed and plunged down. Its rider struck the ground ten feet from Carlin as if flung from a catapult, and lay motionless. Near the embers of the fire, the second man lay motionless, the bound mare struggled unavailingly, and the foal dashed about in frenzied circles.

"All set, Juan!" called Carlin cheerily. "Wait till I kill this poor hoss, then I'll be along. Pile some stuff on the fire, will you?"

The fallen horse was plunging, and Carlin quieted the poor beast with a shot. He went to the rider, found him alive, but knocked senseless, and dragged him by the collar to the fire, which Alvarado was rekindling.

"Your friend over there dead?"

"Yes," said the other, in a matter-of-fact tone. Carlin laughed.

"Partner, you may be hard to get started, but once off you're a wizard! T-In-A-Box men?"

Alvarado nodded, and went to drag the dead rustler beyond the range of light. Carlin took the lariat lying nearby and firmly bound, gagged, and blindfolded his unconscious prisoner, whom he then dragged out of earshot. He came back to the fire and poured coffee into a tin cup, and drank avidly, then refilled the cup for Alvarado.

Cigarettes lighted, the two men gave each other a look; then Alvarado spoke. "What does it mean? Here is a mare and a foal, yes—"

CARLIN brought into the firelight the little bottle and brush which he had retrieved.

"Exhibit A—solution of nitric acid." He then leaned over, and with the end of a strick drew in the sand the double G brand of the Dosados, and pointed to the prostrate mare.

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"Exhibit B—the application of Exhibit A. Here's a mare branded a year or so ago by the Dosados, or whenever she was bought. Now you take the acid and weaken it down considerable, and go along these here dotted lines—and what do you get? A T-In-A-Box. *Sabe?"*

"Oh, I understand that," returned Avarado, frowning; "but why? It would be found out."

"You don't get the point. It heals over in five-six days, and looks like an old brand. Then, later on, it fades out altogether, bein' real weak; but it lasts long enough to serve the purpose. There's a big roundup to sort out the slickears and foals—and naturally, the foal goes with its ma. This here is obviously one of Mar-

vin's mares, so Marvin claims the foal and brands him. There's not going to be any close examination for worked-over brands, now with Clonmel in charge of our gang, and Marvin in charge of his, you can bet! It goes through slick. Then, after a few months, the hair grows out and the acid-brand vanishes. The mare becomes a Dosados mare again, but the foal is branded T-In-A-Box and stays so. Now you sabe why them fences are down, huh?"

"Sure. I see." Alvarado leaned forward and stamped out his cigarette. "But that leaves the Marvin brand larger than customary—"

"What's that between friends? By next roundup she's faded out, and Marvin gets the foal!"

The other nodded. "And now what?"

"Action, partner. We don't want the sheriff messing in here. This is a case for the Stockmen's Association. Let's see; no telephones outside of town—hm! Didn't I hear tell there were a couple o' cattle outfits at this end of the valley?"

"Two; the Running Bar W is ten miles up, in Robles Canon."

"That's the ticket—let these cattlemen find out that acid is being used, and they'll sure buy chips! Your job is to find that dead man's horse, which is somewhere close around, and beat it up to the Running Bar W. Bring everybody in sight; the more witnesses the merrier."

"And you?"

"I stay with the evidence—and to get some more. I got a pencil, but no paper, and I need some."

"I have nothing," said Alvarado, "except the pay check I got today—"

"Hand her over. A signed confession on the back won't hurt it none, and you can get another check."

Alvarado reluctantly obeyed, then rose.

"*Adios!*"

Make it *hasta luego*, and make it quick," said Carlin. "Tell 'em to bring a lantern when they come, because I'll sure open up on whoever drifts along unannounced—and we'll need the lantern to examine the evidence, anyhow."

Alvarado melted into the darkness. Presently he sang out that he had the horse, called a farewell, and went pounding away.

CARLIN SAT for a long while smoking, finishing the last of the coffee, and meditating. He had stumbled headfirst upon a very clever scheme to rob the Dosados of its blooded stock, or rather a clever application of an ancient scheme. This scheme required the cooperation of Clonmel, naturally. Marvin would keep the acid-branded mares on his own range until the acid marks had faded out, leaving the Dosados brand, and would then gradually slip them back to their own range. The profits in blooded colts thus obtained would be huge.

"He could afford to pay these branders twenty bucks each!" mused Carlin; "and likewise he couldn't afford to have Wildcat Carlin butting into the game."

He marveled at the way fate had enmeshed Marvin, whose course of action now lay clear to his sight. With the death of Don Gutierrez, or perhaps before then, Marvin had laid his plans. His desire to absorb the Dosados had been no secret. He gained Clonmel, probably with direct bribes and large promises, and the work began. Clonmel falsified accounts of stock and delayed the spring roundup as long as possible, while Marvin set his acid-branders to work. With only a girl, largely ignorant of the business, to fool, the task was simple and sure.

By the time Carlin bought into the Dosados, the work had gone too far to be halted. Thus Marvin was compelled to plunge yet more deeply; and murder came into the story.

THE MOON was mounting, full and clear, and Carlin set to work gathering fuel. He found a pair of straggling manzanitas on the nearby slope, and deposited his brush there, bringing over a pair of brands from the other fire. He went to the captive, who was still senseless, and dragged him over to the manzanitas. Except for bruises, the gentleman was unhurt. He was a stranger to Carlin.

Presently the rustler groaned, lifted his head, and stared dazedly around. He found his extended wrists firmly lashed to blood-red manzanita limbs, his ankles likewise extended and lashed to stakes; further, his shirt was slit open in front to expose his naked chest, while his boots were gone and his trousers were slit to the knee. He gulped down his astonishment, understood his situation, and stared at Carlin, who sat beside the blazing fire, writing with a pencil. Carlin glanced up, met his wondering gaze, and nodded amiably.

"Hello, partner! Just a minute, now. I need to fill in the blanks here, if you'll oblige. Wait until I read this over to you."

He did so, and had nearly finished when the captive uttered an angry oath. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Workin' for the Dosados."

"You let me go, hear? Clonmel will skin you for this—"

"You misapprehend," said Wildcat. "I'm working for the Dosados, not for Clonmel. Now, I need to know how many more of your riders are in on this game, besides Marvin himself; whether any of our boys, except Clonmel, are in on it; and about how many horses you've touched up with the fire-juice. Dictate while I write."

"Go to hell," snapped the other surlily.

"Well, just as you like. This here confession has got to be plumb willing."

Wildcat Carlin laid aside his paper and pencil, and rolled a smoke.

"Who done this to my clothes?" said the captive presently; "and what for?"

"I did, so you could enjoy the sweet night air. Besides I want to mark you up a bit and show you how it feels to be a hoss when you're around."

When he had finished his cigarette, Carlin reached around behind the captive, where he had placed the nearly empty coffee-pot. In his hand was the brush used for the acid-work—a small brush of wire bristles. He dipped this in the coffee, then came in front of his prisoner, and surveyed the latter with an indecisive air. The rustler's eyes dilated in slow horror.

"I ain't right sure," said Carlin, reflectively, "whether to mark you on the feet or on the breast. Maybe the legs would do to start with. Yes, I reckon—"

"Don't you put that hell-fire on me!" With a frenzied yell, the captive threshed about and tugged at his lashings, but to no avail. Carlin inspected him reproachfully. "You don't think you're better'n a hoss, do you? Well, I don't; so here we go."

With this, he decorated his captive's right leg and foot with a large smear of coffee.

Now, the rustler was naturally cold, the firelight gave the coffee a weird hue, and Mr. Carlin was careful to press the wire bristles well into the skin. Then he stood off and inspected the job, oblivious of his victim's wild yells.

"Now, I reckon we'll go for the breast, and maybe give you a nice marking along the face," he observed. "Of course, you don't have to tell anything—"

"Fer gosh' sake, don't!" begged the other, wildly. "Wipe that stuff off'n me quick. I'll tell anything you want to know!"

In five minutes Wildcat Carlin had his confession completed and signed.

MIDNIGHT was past and gone when the bobbing light of a

lantern became visible far down the canon. Carlin rose, stretched himself, and threw some more brush on the fire. A number of riders came up, foremost among them the owner of the Running Bar W, Steve Williams by name, a grizzled, square-jawed old cattleman, who shook hands heartily with "Hobbins" at Alvarado's introduction. Carlin addressed him without delay.

"Williams, let's you and me step aside for a minute or two."

The two walked off beyond earshot, and Wildcat talked rapidly. Steve Williams swore, then laughed, and listened with attention. Then he clapped "Hobbins" heartily on the back.

"So you're Wildcat Carlin! By gosh, boy, we'll sure do it! Hey, Alvarado; come here!"

Juan Alvarado approached, and was made aware of the identity of Mr. Carlin, whereat he uttered amazed and soft-voiced oaths.

"You got any kin around here?" asked Carlin.

"Not here. I have two brothers in Santa Fe."

"Then come home and go to your brother's funeral. You got to do some traveling between now and Saturday, Williams. Got any money on you? We'll have to make up Juan's expenses to Denver. I've got thirty."

"I can make up fifty."

They returned to the scene, poor Alvarado in helpless wonderment. Williams went over everything with his four punchers. They identified the dead man, and promptly buried him, inspected the mare, still bound down with the captive's lariat, which was also identified; then had a short talk with the unhappy captive himself. Then the punchers loosed the mare and cleaned up the ground, while Williams indited a note, which he gave to Alvarado.

"They know me pretty well in Denver," he said. "This'll do the work. Carlin will tell you the rest. Where's that there confession? We'd better sign it as witnesses."

Twenty minutes later, the Running Bar W party rode homeward again, taking with them the captive rustler, and leaving behind them no traces of the night's work, except the dead horse. Carlin and Juan Alvarado returned afoot toward their own camp.

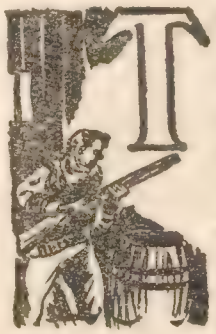
"Sure you can do it, now?" demanded Carlin, after explanations. To his delight, the other laughed softly.

"Sure! If I can get over the Conejo Pass by tomorrow noon, I can get the train and make Denver late tomorrow night. We can be back by Saturday, sure."

"Good for you, Juan!" said Carlin. "Now let's ride hard for home. You can get a fresh bronc there and then hit out for your brother's funeral. I reckon Clonmel will be one of the mourners, though he don't know it yet!"

Alvarado grinned. He liked the new boss of the Dosados.

6



THE TWO men reached home in time for breakfast, but Juan Alvarado did not pause to talk things over. He stuffed some food into his pockets, told his wife where he was going, saddled a fresh bronc, and parted, leaving explanations to Carlin. The latter, giving no outward sign of his sleepless and exciting night's work, entered the patio of the ranch-house after a good wash-up, and bade every one good morning.

"Where's Alvarado?" growled Clonmel, who looked in a bad humor.

"Met a feller, heard his brother in Santa Fe was dying, and streaked out."

"With his pay-check, sure," grunted the foreman. Miss Gutierrez met the blandly innocent gaze of "Mr. Hobbins," and before his cheerful grin a smile came into her eyes.

"How did you find things, Red?" she inquired.

Clonmel gave his new rider a savage look, but Carlin ignored it. "Looks like there'll be work ahead," he returned. "Fences all down and a lot of other stock running with ours. Don't you folks ever have a roundup?"

"Starting out tomorrow," said Clonmel. "When the branding's over, we'll get the fences in shape for the year. How far up did you go?"

"Pugar Canon. Quite a bit of T-In-A-Box stock drifting in, up that way." Carlin reached for the butter. "Two of Marvin's riders had a grand battle up there yesterday evening."

"Who with? Not with you?" inquired the girl quickly.

"With me?" Carlin regarded her in injured surprise. "I should say not, ma'am! With themselves, I reckon. We found a dead hoss, and heard 'em shooting and cussing something awful. Coroner get out here about that Ximinez affair?"

Clonmel watched him in scowling suspicion, but Miss Gutierrez nodded.

"Yes," she returned. "It seems that you are quite clear, I'm glad to say."

"We'd better arrange with Marvin to have him or a couple of his men on the roundup," spoke up Clonmel. "If there's much of his stock with ours, that is. Shall I ride over there today?"

Carlin flashed Inez a look, which she interpreted correctly. At the same time he was puzzled by the glance which she returned. It was anything but cordial.

"No; don't bother," she said. "I'm going into town, and I'll go to Marvin's first. You might come with me, Hobbins, and make arrangements, if you're not too weary."

"Not a bit," he returned cheerfully. "Fresh as a daisy, ma'am."

"Some mail for you in your bunk," said Clonmel, with a sour grin. Carlin glanced up. He met a cold and impersonal look from Miss Gutierrez, and the other men were watching him with furtive amusement Clonmel chuckled. "Didn't tell us you had folks trailin' along, Red!"

Puzzled and at a loss, Carlin only nodded and kept silence. Miss Inez curtly told him to be ready in an hour, and left the table. Then broke out various comments.

"Leetle Red, he mus' be a fine boy, no?"

"Pretty soon we must start a schoolhouse here!"

"Funny how some people like to write post-cards, ain't it?"

Carlin gathered that this banter was directed at him, and that the cause had something to do with the mail in his bunk.

"What are you folks so interested in, anyhow?" he demanded.

"You." Clonmel grinned anew. "I reckon there's a little surprise comin' for you."

A burst of laughter greeted this remark.

"I don't get you," said the puzzled Carlin; "but if you-all can find any amusement in shooting off your mouths, go to it!"

UPON HIS bunk, he found the explanation in the shape of a post-card, which must have come the evening before. It was addressed to Red Hobbins, at the Dosados, and bore the large and heavy scrawl of Sallie Carter—writing that the most incurious eye could hardly overlook.

Dear Red:

Am coming with Junior. Got wire from Mac at Espanola, with money. See you soon, dearie.

Sallie.

The truth burst upon Carlin with agonizing force.

"Oh, my gosh! That durned fool was up at Espanola, Mac wired him—he was halfway here—and he prob'ly had my other gun with him, but didn't want to say so—lordy! And naturally, these jaspers read it, and she heard about it, and thought—"

He gulped, then looked up as a figure blotted the sunlight from the doorway, and beheld Clonmel, who grinned at him.

"Got the news, have you? Well, listen here—how come you killed Ximenez, eh?"

"Luck," murmured Carlin, still dazed by that postal.

"It'll be suicide if you go over to the T-In-A-Box, you fool!" Clon-

mel glared, and rubbed his broken nose.

"I don't care," said Carlin tragically, and tore up the card. Clonmel snorted.

"Huh! If that's the way you feel about it, all right. It's your funeral."

Clonmel departed. Wildcat shaved and changed his clothes. Then, lighting a cigarette, he departed to the corral, to saddle a fresh horse for his trip to Marvin's.

Everyone was busy, since the roundup was to start in at the far north end of the range by Pugar Canon, and work gradually down to the home ranch. A native cook had come out from town and was getting the chuck-wagon in shape. A string of riding broncs were being hazed into the corral, while the wood-wagon was being loaded up for the morrow's start. A bed-wagon was dispensed with.

"Help yourself, dearie!" sang out a vaquero with a wide grin, as Carlin came up to the corral with his rope. "Rough string's all ready for you. Cut out that black for Miss Inez and top him off a bit, will you, dearie? He's got a kettlin' streak."

Carlin obeyed, noting that Clonmel drifted over to get an eyeful and see how much "Mr. Red Hobbins" knew about peeling broncs. When the black had lost his early morning's exuberance, Carlin cut out a mount for himself, and put him through his paces likewise. The shaking up did him good, and he was feeling more cheerful when he rejoined the vaquero at the corral gate.

"If you fellers weren't so blamed interested reading other folks' mail," he began, then checked himself abruptly. Miss Gutierrez appeared almost at his elbow.

"If you're ready, we'll go," she said quietly. "Leave your gun at home, please. I intend to see to it that Johnny Marvin and his men do not try to make your encounter with Ximinez run into a feud."

"Yes'm," said Carlin, and gave his gun to the vaquero. "Lay it in my bunk. So long."

They rode off together, striking directly across country for the T-In-A-Box. For perhaps a mile they rode in silence, until Carlin came alongside the black and spoke. "Grand weather we're having, ain't it? Do you aim to go with the roundup?"

"No; of course not. When you get closer to home; I'll come out, but you'll probably be up at Pugar Canon for several days, and it's pretty far to ride out and back. I'll have enough to do here with the spring house-cleaning."

"Hm!" Carlin began to make a cigarette. "I thought as much. Well, if I were you I'd change the program a mite, miss, but without saying anything. You arrange to come on up there Saturday. Along about Saturday afternoon there'll be some right interesting doin's. I expect."

She gave him a steady look. "What do you expect?"

"Quite a few things. Let the bars down on Clonmel today, or else stay in town all day so's he can't meet up with Marvin somewheres. If he don't he'll sure bust from inside pressure. Along about tomorrow, when we get started on roundup, Clonmel is goin' to give me my time, or try to. At least, I figure it that way."

She frowned. "Hadn't you better let me in on the secret?" she demanded coldly.

"Nope; it might be dangerous. You just manage to get to camp Saturday, and stick around. I wish you hadn't made me leave my gun at home, though. I sure hate to take chances."

"You'll not need any gun, Mr. Hobbins."

"Here's hoping. And, say! When Carter shows up, send him right along to camp, will you? He'll probably get here tomorrow."

"I don't read post-cards, but evidently the boys do," she returned; "and I heard their talk. I didn't know that your family was on the way here."

"Neither did I," agreed Carlin cheerfully. She gave him an angry glance.

"What do you mean?"

"I just don't know, that's all," returned Carlin. "Just for writing that card, I'm going to give Sallie the finest black eye you ever saw!"

MISS GUTIERREZ looked startled, and several times thereafter, eyed her escort in puzzled fashion, but did not recur to the subject of Sallie. Since "Mr. Hobbins" appeared no whit shamefaced or downcast, she seemed to find the topic rather uncertain.

Topping a rise, they found the county road ahead of them, and upon it two other riders. An exclamation broke from the girl. "There's Marvin now! Good—I'll not have to go on to his ranch. Come along!"

They touched up the broncs, and swept down toward the road. Tex Winters was with Marvin, and Carlin noted that they were heading north. He also noted a certain satisfaction in the look that Marvin bent upon him, as the four came together. Marvin and Tex doffed hats.

"Morning, Miss Inez!" Marvin had a notable outdoor voice, and boomed forth his words with unction. He sat a large roan with easy grace and was undeniably handsome in his gaunt way. "Looks as if you were bound for my place! Is the luck mine?"

"All of it," responded the girl. "Morning, Tex. I was bound over to ask you if you'd like to have anybody along with our roundup outfit, Mr. Marvin. Hobbins, here, has just come in from the north end of the range, and reports fences down and a good deal of mixed stock running up that way. Our roundup has been delayed, but is getting off tomorrow."

"Why, that's kind of you, Miss Inez!" responded Marvin, his eyes sweeping to Carlin for an instant. He nodded thoughtfully. "I reckon I might go along myself, and maybe bring a couple o' boys. We've missed a lot of colts up that-a-way, and most likely they're in with your stock. What about them fences? Want that we should go in with you and get 'em fixed up?"

"After roundup is over, we might do it," responded the girl. "You haven't met my new rider, Red Hobbins? Mr. Marvin, Red, and Tex Winters."

"Glad to meet you," said "Hobbins", and grinned at Tex. "I've met this jasper already."

Tex chuckled. Marvin, however, regarded "Hobbins" gravely.

"So this is the man, is it?" he said. "It was right unfortunate about you and Ximinez the other day, Red."

"Yes, it was," declared the girl with emphasis. "That's another matter I want to see you about. If there's going to be any bad feeling, I'd like to know it here and now."

"Shucks, no!" said Marvin and shrugged. "Ximinez was a good vaquero, but he was plumb cultus at times—real bad. Hobbins pulled a bad joke on him, that's all, and riled him up. No; you stand in the clear so far's I'm concerned. Red. Suit you?"

"Sure," said Carlin with a relieved air, whereat the girl eyed him rather strangely. "I was a heap worried, for a fact. Then after that doings yesterday up in Pugar Canon, I thought maybe I'd get blamed."

"Eh?" said Marvin sharply. "What doings?"

"Well, I don't know the rights of it." Carlin crooked one knee over his saddle and rolled a cigarette as he lazied. "I was up there with Juan Alvarado, and along towards dark we were starting home, and met one of your riders. He seemed mighty put out about something, and asked whether we'd seen anybody else; yes, sir, he was real mad and out for blood. Said the other feller had pulled some skunk trick on him—robbed him or something. It didn't look likely, besides which, his vaquero had had a few drinks, to judge by his manner. A little later on we stopped for supper, and heard some shooting, and pretty soon came on a dead T-In-A-Box cayuse laying in the canon. Then we came home."

Marvin pulled his heavy mustache, his blue eyes were very sharp and bright.

"Who was the puncher you met?" he demanded.

"I dunno his name." Carlin met the stare with disarming innocence. "He was a big buckaroo, with a scar on his left cheek."

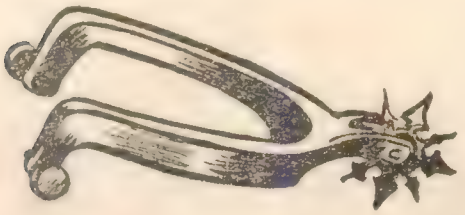
"Joe Grant," exclaimed Tex, gaping. "So him and Pecos had a fight! That's why Pecos' hoss wandered in this morning! I bet they killed each other!"

Miss Gutierrez turned to her horse.

"Well, I hope they didn't," she said. "I'm off for town. Mr. Marvin, you can settle details with Red—and you can understand that he isn't armed."

"My dear Miss Inez, understand that I have nothing against him," said Marvin, smiling. "I want to avoid range trouble, just as much as you do, and more."

"All right," said the girl. "If there's any more mail for you, Hobbins, I'll bring it out myself, and you can be sure it won't be read. So long, everybody."



SHE DEPARTED along the road. When she was well gone, Marvin turned to Carlin with an air that was distinctly suspicious and unfriendly.

"Now, then, cowboy, you do some talking, and do it straight! First, what about them two vaqueros in Pugar Canon?"

"You know all I do," said Carlin, with an injured expression.

"Were they working at anything?"

"At each other, was about all we could see."

"Hm!" Marvin frowned, bit his mustache, then nodded. "All right. Now, then, what about this Ximinez business? Is it straight goods that Clonmel put you up to it? Did Clonmel find that tobacco sack?"

Carlin looked distinctly uneasy. "Well, it was all a joke, wasn't it?" he protested. "Maybe Ximinez did kill that jasper Carlin, or whatever his name was. There's a lot I don't understand myself. Just like Clonmel says—the greaser probably needed what he got."

"Clonmel said that, did he?" demanded Marvin grimly.

"Well, not in so many words, maybe—"

Tex Winters pushed his horse forward, all his amiability gone. "You ain't as foolish as you act, Red," he said, scowling. "I'd admire to know—"

"You shut up and go in town and get the mail," said Johnny Marvin, in a voice that admitted of no argument. "I'll ride up to Pugar Canon myself and see what's what. Get going, now, and no talk! And lay off that bootlegger whiskey, or I'll give you your time."

TEX WINTERS turned his horse and departed surlily. "Good thing you got rid of him," said Carlin, with a confidential air. "Now I can give you that message from Clonmel. He said to be careful."

"Hm! Seems to me like Clonmel is sayin' a lot," grunted Marvin.

"I reckon so," was the bland response. "He wants to see you mighty bad—said he'd ride over this afternoon."

"Well, I'll ride over to the Dosados right now. and then go on north. Which way you heading?"

Carlin glanced after the speck of dust which denoted Tex Winters. "I'll jog to town, I reckon. So long."

"So long," said Marvin and turned from the road.

For perhaps two miles, Carlin pursued his easy course toward town. The morning sun was warm, he had ridden hard the previous night, and he dozed lazily in the saddle. Another mile or so, and ahead he made out the fork where the branched road turned off to the Dosados, with its signpost bearing the Double G brand. There he paused and reflected.

"What's the use going on? She's bound to come back in time for dinner, anyhow—"

He got off, hobbled his horse and let the animal graze. He himself stretched out in the sand beside the road, and pulled his hat over his face, wondering gleefully what Clonmel and Johnny Marvin were saying to each other. Then he fell asleep.

LOUD WAGON shouts close to his ear aroused him, and he hastily scrambled up to find high noon upon the land, and a wagon

standing almost upon him. In the wagon grinning at him, was Steve Williams of the Running Bar W, and standing beside the wagon holding the reins of her black, was Miss Gutierrez, laughing heartily.

"Sound like the trump o' doom, cowboy?" exclaimed Williams, betraying no recognition. "Who's payin' your wages while you sleep, huh?"

"I wasn't asleep," protested Carlin indignantly. "Can't you tell when a feller's asleep and when he's just resting? Well, I was resting."

He departed after his horse, and by the time he returned, Williams was departing with a farewell wave of the hand. Carlin joined the girl, who regarded him with a slight flush.

"Mr. Williams is going to send a couple of riders to the roundup. He thinks that a lot of his saddle stock may have drifted in with ours."

"Oh! more'n likely," assented Wildcat, and then met her dark-blue eyes, quizzically. "What's the trouble? You look like you'd been caught stealing sheep or something."

"I have." She laughed a little, then extended a post-card. "I read this before I thought. It never occurred to me—"

Carlin took the card, and a tide of red crept across his freckled features as he read the words in Sally Carter's huge, bold scrawl:

Coming with Lizzie. Due Thursday.

Sallie.

"Your family seems to be increasing," observed the girl brightly. Carlin met her gaze, and then grinned rather uneasily.

"I reckon families do. Somehow, it appears to be a natural failing. Let's see—tomorrow's Thursday, ain't it?"

"Barring rain, it is." Her gaze dwelt upon him half-smilingly. "Why? Want to beg off the roundup and stay in town to meet your family?"

"Well, ma'am, it's all the family I have," said Carlin, still flushed.

"Did you have any trouble with Marvin? Have you found out anything more yet?"

"No and yes; a whole lot more. Now, if you reckon you could explain things so Clonmel would think—"

"Why not tell him the truth?" said Miss Gutierrez, with slight asperity. "That you want to meet your family and will join the outfit Friday?"

Carlin swallowed hard. Only his stubborn pride kept him from confession. "I guess so. I'll ride back with you, then go to town—"

"You're part way there now, so you'd better go along," interrupted the girl. "I don't need any company, thanks. I'll have them leave your gray bronc in the corral, shall I?"

"Please," said Carlin.

JOHNNY MARVIN rode up to the Dosados ranch-house, and passed on toward the corrals. One of the vaqueros called Clonmel, who came striding forth.

"Morning, Johnny! Miss Gutierrez went over to your place."

"I met her," returned Marvin. "Came on here for a word with you."

"Will you 'light?"

"Nope." Marvin shot a look around, saw that the vaqueros were going on with their work out of earshot, and his blue eyes came to rest upon Clonmel. "What did you mean by settin' Red Hobbins on to Ximinez, that-a-way?"

"Who? Me?" Clonmel was staggered by this accusation. "My gosh, Johnny, what you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the joke you tried to play, and you'd better talk turkey."

Clonmel gathered himself together. "Joke!" he exclaimed dazedly. "This is the first I ever heard of any joke. I wasn't even here."

Marvin regarded him with inflexible, menacing gazes. "None o' that, now. You rode away from here, met Hobbins, and went on. Hobbins came along and pulled that joke—"

"What joke?" snapped Clonmel.

"This here." Marvin drew forth the half-filled tobacco sack and displayed the initials of Garcia Ximinez. "According to Hobbins' yarn, you rode out of Los Gatos Sunday, to where Carlin was killed, and found this, and turned it over to him to spring on Ximinez—"

Clonmel uttered an astounded burst of profanity. "It's all a damned lie!" he concluded fiercely. "I was in Los Gatos all the while—can prove it easy! I was playin' pool until after church was out, then I got me some dinner at the restaurant—"

"Sure of that?"

"Dead sure. Three of your own boys was in the pool room."

"Then, what did Hobbins tell that yarn for? He said you were coming over this afternoon to see me—"

"I never told him that!" snapped Clonmel; "but he done told me that you'd talked a heap about me, Johnny Marvin. I'll let you know right here that I've done no talking—"

"Hold on!" ejaculated Marvin sharply. "I never mentioned your name to him—was careful to say nothing."

THE TWO men stared at each other for half a minute. Then Clonmel, his eyes widening, ripped out an oath. "Here, you wait a minute! I found something I want to show you."

He turned and strode rapidly away toward the bunk-house. Marvin looked after him frowningly until he reappeared. Clonmel came up and held out a pistol.

"Take a look at that. Miss Inez made him leave it here. It was on his bunk."

Marvin took the pistol and examined it, while Clonmel glowered up at him. On the barrel had been etched a signature in acid—a signature that drew an exclamation from Marvin.

"J. Carlin! What the devil does this mean?"

"That's the point," said Clonmel grimly.

"Hm! Tex Winters said that this Hobbins was standing by Carlin in the road—mm!" Johnny Marvin's eyes narrowed speculatively. "That's why Carlin didn't have a thing on him, just like the sheriff thought. Hobbins frisked the corpse."

"If you ask me," spoke out Clonmel, "this Red Hobbins ain't the fool he tries to look, not by a long shot."

Marvin smiled unpleasantly. "If I'd only played the cards I had," he muttered, "then I'd have drawn the full. I sure owe Tex an apology."

"What for?" asked Clonmel.

"For passing up his good hunch." Marvin straightened up, shook his square shoulders, and returned the weapon to Clonmel. His blue eyes were steely. "This fellow is one of Carlin's men, no doubt about that, and he's a sly fox. Tried to pull the wool over my eyes, tried to get you and me at outs—blast him! Is Miss Inez coming home in time for dinner?"

"Most likely."

"Hobbins went on to town. If he comes back with her, fetch him along on roundup in the morning. If he doesn't come back, can you send one of your vacqueros into town after dinner?"

"Sure."

"Or wait! Send this note over to my place, right now." Marvin produced pencil and paper, and scribbled briefly. "I have to get up to Pugar Canon right off. Joe Grant and Pecos went up there yesterday to pull the last trick. They haven't come back—"

"Hobbins said there's been a fight," put in Clonmel excitedly. "Him and Alvarado come in this morning with the news."

Marvin nodded, and handed over the note. "I'll make sure about it. Those two, you, and I are the only ones in the game, and we can't take chances. Hobbins told me they had a fight, but he may have lied again. I'll have to look things over before your outfit gets up there."

"Then, if Hobbins comes back from town—"

"If he doesn't come back with Miss Inez, he won't come back," said Marvin. "This note will attend to that. If he does, we'll attend to him tomorrow. I'll be along there with two of the boys and we'll cut out the mares as fast as you turn 'em over

to us, and haze 'em along to our range. Won't stop for branding. I figure about three hundred."

"About," and Clonmel nodded. "I've kept the figures down to around there."

"Then between now and Saturday night, we'll clean up the lot." Marvin gathered his reins. "So long!"

"So long," repeated Clonmel.

Before Marvin was out of sight, one of the Dosados vaqueros was spurring across country with the note for the T-In-A-Box outfit.

THE HOT noonday sunshine was drooling over the valley in dusty languor when Inez Gutierrez came riding home, alone. Clonmel met her, and took her horse as she alighted.

"Marvin was here," he announced. "He seemed right worried over that fight Hobbins told about, in Pugar Canon, and headed for there. He sent Vaca over to his place with a note, telling some of his boys to get up there and cut out their stock tomorrow."

"Yes, I saw him," said the girl. "By the way, I told Hobbins he could stay over in town and meet his family. He got a card saying they'd reach Los Gatos tomorrow. Then he'll be along to join you at the north end."

Clonmel rubbed his bristly chin.

"We're goin' to be mighty short-handed up there, with him and Alvarado gone," he complained; "but I guess we can make it, with Marvin's boys along."

"You'll have two or three from the Running Bar W, too," said the girl. "I met Steve Williams, and he thinks some of his saddle stock has run in with ours, so he'll send over a couple of representatives; also, I got track of a man in town I may engage tomorrow.

"Good enough, ma'am," responded Clonmel, who was not worried over this information a whit.

The body of "Carlin" had been shipped back to Socorro on instructions from his foreman. Upon hearing this from the girl, Clonmel's satisfaction was complete.

Next morning early, with the sun still struggling to surmount the eastern peaks and the Black Mesa to the north still a purpled mass against the horizon, Clonmel got his two wagons off, with one of his vaqueros for pilot. He himself, with the remaining two men, set off direct, and spurred hard for Pugar Canon, to get there ahead of the outfit.

This so-called "round-up" was a more or less makeshift affair. Between the home ranch and the north end of the range were one or two corrals to which the stock could be hazed, but Pugar Canon itself was a natural corral, albeit a big one. There was not a great amount of riding to do, and no remuda was needed; for the canon with its bottle neck and grassy "box" presented no difficulties in rounding up the stock.

IN THE afternoon Clonmel rode up the lower canon with his two vaqueros, hazing ahead of them a number of stray horses they had encountered. Several buzzards were circling lazily ahead, and Clonmel left his two men to bring on the stock, while he rode ahead. As he expected, he found Johnny Marvin and four T-In-A-Box riders encamped, and at a little distance was the carcass of the killed horse.

Marvin came out to meet Clonmel, who swung from the saddle with a grunt of relief. "What news?"

"Bad enough," responded Johnny Marvin, tugging at his tow-colored mustache. "Pecos was killed, all right—two bullets through him. We dug him up. He'd been buried in a hurry. His bronc came in to the ranch, and that's Joe Grant's hoss over there."

"Where's Joe, then?"

"Ask me something easy! Vamosed, I reckon—vamosed afoot." Marvin looked uneasy. "The blamed fool must ha' buried Pecos. Likely they had some liquor along, and when he sobered up, he got scared. No sign of him. He must have lit out. We'll wait until tomorrow and see whether he shows up. He may be hurt and hiding out somewhere around here. Where's your outfit?"

"Stuck somewhere, I expect. Too late to get started today, anyhow.

Steve Williams is going to send two-three men over to look for loose saddle stock. Say, Red Hobbins stayed in town."

Marvin nodded. "All right. One of the boys went to town, and Tex Winters was there already. Don't worry about that hombre. Well, I suppose we'll have to notify the coroner about this killing, but no hurry. We don't want the sheriff nosing until we get our own business attended to. Two of my boys can take in what stock we collect tomorrow, hazing them along in the evening, and send word to town. Doc Honeywell and the sheriff will get out about Saturday afternoon, eh?"

"Ought to. They'll take a car out, walking over from the road. We'd ought to get most of your stock cut out by that time and started home."

"Right," assented Marvin. "I hope Joe Grant is either clean away, or else will see the camp-smoke and drift in some time tomorrow, so we can give him a hoss and get him away. I've been up looking over the stock. It's a safe job."

Clonmel nodded.

In course of time the outfit arrived, with word of a large band of strays that the pilot was holding, so Marvin's men went out to help. Night closed down with camp established and a big job ahead, the upper canon being well filled with stock.

NEXT MORNING all hands were hard at work in the upper canon when Steve Williams and two of his vaqueros rode in. The grizzled old cattleman greeted Clonmel, exchanged a few words regarding his saddle stock, a few of which were in sight, and then turned to Marvin as the latter came up.

"Morning, Johnny! Get your cripple all right?"

"Eh? Who?" demanded Marvin.

"That rider of yours, Joe."

Marvin displayed sudden interest. "Joe Grant? What's become of him?"

"Why, he done limped in the other day and borrowed a hoss—said his had throwed him and broke its leg, and he's hurt his ankle."

"When was this? He ain't home yet," said Marvin.

"Let's see—this is Friday, ain't it? Wednesday morning, that's when. Right early, too."

"He's lit out then," said Marvin, and glanced at Clonmel. "Bad business, Steve. He and Pecos come up this-a-way Tuesday. Two o' Clonmel's men were looking over fences and heard shooting. We found Pecos' bronc straying in to the ranch, and when he got up here we found Joe Grant's hoss dead, down there outside the bottle neck."

"I seen it," said Williams, his shrewd old eyes watching the two men.

"Well, we found the body of Pecos with two bullets in it," said Marvin. "Looks like he and Joe got into a scrap. Pecos got killed, and Joe lit out for parts unknown."

Steve Williams managed to conceal his lively satisfaction. Wildcat Carlin had predicted just such a conclusion, but it had seemed too good to be true.

"Well, seein's you got some o' my stock, I'll just leave them two boys, if it's all right with you," he said to Clonmel. "They can haze along what you find today, and in the morning I'll send out a couple more with some grub, and maybe a beef, since you folks can't eat hoss very well. So long, boys."

Steve Williams rode away, leaving his two riders to cut out saddle stock and garner any news of "Mr. Hobbins" that came their way—which was little.

That evening two of the T-In-A-Box riders departed with a goodly string of mares and colts, all quite obviously the property of Johnny Marvin and cut into his sting without protest. All were very fine animals too.

EARLIER than the sun Saturday morning was Tex Winters riding into camp on the red wings of dawn. His appearance was greeted by a shout of joy from all hands, for he bore a large and conspicuous black eye. Ignoring the hilarious comments, he made his way to Marvin, and jerked his head slightly.

"Want to speak with you, Johnny."

Marvin beckoned Clonmel, and the three walked apart. Tex Winters, who was quite unaware of the real reason behind the removal of "Mr. Hobbins," looked suspiciously at the Dosados foreman and did not hesitate to voice his thought.

"You'd better talk with me first, Marvin—"

"That's all right," said Marvin hastily. "Clonmel is in on the business. What news?"

"We got him," said Tex.

"How?"

"With a beer-bottle over the ear—and even then, durned if he didn't put up a scrap to make your eyes bulge! He made mine bulge—he sure did."

"Where is he?"

"Peterson's—that old nester's shack on the Fort Johnson Road." Tex licked a cigarette and scraped a match on his cuff. "Reilly is stayin' with him for company; but that ain't all the news by a good deal."

The significance of his tone, the look in his one good eye, held the attention of both his auditors. "I'll bet a dollar you don't know who this jasper Hobbins is, Johnny!"

"One of Carlin's crowd."

"Nope; he's Carlin. Yes, sir! Found a money-belt on him, and likewise his initials. When Reilly crowned him with the bottle, he'd just been writing a letter to his foreman. We got the letter. There was one hell of a mistake made last Sunday, that's what!"

There was a long moment of startled silence. Then Tex Winters held out the letter in question and Marvin seized it. With a bitter oath, he passed it on to Clonmel after scanning it briefly.

"They sure named him right!" observed Tex Winters. "Wildcat Carlin he is."

Marvin turned on him savagely. "What you tellin' me this for? Why didn't you finish him while you were about it?"

Tex Winters pulled at his cigarette, and met the glittering blue eyes steadily. "My name ain't Ximinez," he said. "Likewise, I'm hired as a hoss-hand, not as a killer. Looks to me it's about time you done your own work, Johnny."

Marvin bit his lips, and his eyes hardened. What Winters said, was perfectly true. Then the rider continued.

"I done ordered a car to come out this-a-way and pick you up opposite here on the road about eight o'clock. You can get a hoss in town, and get out to Peterson's by nine-thirty easy."

"Good work, Tex," said Marvin, with a nod. "Run along and get some chuck, and stick around here today."

Winters turned and departed for the chuck-wagon. Marvin met the startled, glowering, glassy eyes of Clonmel.

"Well?" he said sharply. "We're both in on this. It's got to be done."

"All right," growled Clonmel; "but we can't both leave here. Somebody's got to keep an eye on things and see they move right until we get the last of those mares cut out. Some of those boys are apt to get inquisitive. You say the word, and I'll go finish off that Hobbins feller—or Carlin. I never did like his looks."

Marvin wavered at this offer, but shook his head. "No; we'll both run along and do the job, and then burn the shack. I'll tell those riders of mine to cut out all our mares in sight and get 'em moving along toward our range."

8

WHEN SHE had waved the departing outfit a last farewell, Inez Gutierrez set about her spring housecleaning without further loss of time.

At the end of the first day she had finished with her office and the house. Friday morning she visited the bunk-house to see whether this needed attention in the absence of its inmates. An inspection of some thirty seconds con-

vinced her that she would do well to put Tia Manuela on this task during the afternoon, and she was turning to leave when she caught sight of something on a bunk near the window. She went over and examined it, and then carried it outside and stood staring at the name graven upon it.

This object was Mr. Carlin's private and unhappily forgotten pistol.

For a long minute, the girl stood there, puzzled bewilderment in her face as she read the signature etched on the barrel. Then she lifted her eyes and frowned at the horizon. She was vaguely aware of a dust-swirl coming over the rise, but as she had ordered some things from the store on the previous day, took for granted that it was Billy and the wagon approaching.

"J. Carlin!" she repeated. "But how—"

Suddenly she discovered that the approaching wagon was not Billy's at all, but a spanking new one, gay and glittering in the morning light. A drummer, perhaps—and the thought sent her toward the house in sudden remembrance of her appearance. Before she gained this haven of refuge, the wagon had pulled up to a halt before the entrance, and a curly-haired, merry-eyed young man leaped out and doffed his Stetson.

"Buenas dias, Senorita!" he greeted, a laugh in his eyes. *"Habla usted Ingles?"*

"No, senor," she responded demurely. The newcomer lost his laugh.

"Oh, goshfry! Then I'm out of luck, because that's all the Spanish I ever learned.

"Ain't that just my luck?" he complained. "You're the prettiest girl in New Mexico, and I've done used up all my Spanish at one crack!"

"Que lastima, senor!" she responded.

"Which?" responded the new arrival. "You savvy a heap grand hombre with red hair and a grin, senorita? You savvy Red Hobbins?"

A startled look came into her face, and she lifted her hand. The young man flung up both arms, as the pistol came into sight.

"Don't shoot! I give up—I—oh, my goshfry! If that ain't Senior!"

His mock alarm changed to astonished recognition, as he stared at the automatic under his nose. Then his whole manner changed likewise, and his voice took on a steely ring.

"Where is he, eh? Where's Red Hobbins, senorita? You got his gun there—"

"His gun?" exclaimed the girl in English. "But it's got Carlin's name—"

THE YOUNG man swallowed hard, and a flush crept into his face.

"So you put one over on me, did you?" he said, and then grinned suddenly. "Well, I don't take it back; you're the prettiest girl in this whole blamed Southwest, so there! Now be insulted if you wish."

"I'm not," she responded, and laughed. "I suppose you must be Mr. Carter? But what do you mean by calling this gun Senior?"

Sallie Carter collected himself with an effort.

"Why, that's its name, of course! It's Senior, and this here is Junior." His hand whipped down and up, and produced another pistol like unto the first. "I'm Sallie Carter; didn't Red Hobbins get my post-card?"

"You're—are you?—" Sudden laughter bubbled to the girl's lips. She dropped the gun, and raised both hands to her mouth, emitting a gale of mirth that left her helpless to utter a word of explanation.

"Yes'm, I'm Sallie Carter," he said; "but if you'd let me in on the joke, I'd admire to enjoy it with you. I don't know anybody I'd sooner enjoy a joke with than you, for a fact!"

He leaned over and retrieved the gun, and carefully blew the dust from it.

"Your card, gasped the girl, leaning back against the verandah post for support, "your card said that you and Junior were coming—and it was signed Sallie—and everybody's been calling him 'dearie' ever since!"

Mr. Carter inspected her gravely; then his eyes began to twinkle. "You've been calling him that, too?"

Miss Gutierrez jerked herself erect, a flush rising in her cheeks.

"Well, you said everybody was doing it," he went on hurriedly, and then grinned. "So that's what's the joke, is it? Doggone, I wish I'd been around! No wonder you took time off to laugh—hurray!"

"And your next post-card said that Lizzie was coming—"

Mr. Carter began to laugh in turn, as the full effect of the matter broke upon his benighted intellect. He laughed long and loud, and so infectious was his mirth that the girl fell to laughing again, until they both stood looking at each other and wiping their eyes.

"Well, that's a good one all around, I reckon," he exclaimed. "I was thinking about covering up the facts—I mean, I didn't want Wildcat—that is, I mean—"

HE HALTED in confusion. His disconcerted air was increased by the startled look in the dark blue eyes which widened upon him.

"Who did you say?"

"I meant to say Red Hobbins—"

"No; you didn't! Speak up, please. I'm Miss Gutierrez. Who is this Red Hobbins?"

Mr. Carter scratched his curly locks, and gave up. "Well, I guess you got me. He's Jack Carlin."

"But—it can't be! Carlin was killed on his way here!"

"Sure, by some stroke of luck. I ain't figured it out yet. He wrote he'd been killed, but was still fairly lively for a corpse, and told me to drift along in a hurry with his other gun and both of mine, which I done, and now I'm here, and where is he?"

Sallie Carter shot this all out in one breath.

"Oh!" said the girl faintly, and leaned back against the post once more as she stared at her informant. "Oh! but—but he never told me—"

"Not if he was dead, sure! How could he? Most likely, if he was dead, he laid out to get the jasper that killed him," said Sallie Carter.

"Oh! then that was it!" The girl started suddenly. "That was why he shot Garcia Ximinez and—"

"Who did?" demanded Carter sharply.

"Red Hobbins—or Carlin—but where is he?"

Mr. Carter stared at her in some bewilderment. "My goshfry! That's just what I been trying to get out of you. Where is he?"

Alarm leaped in her eyes. "You—you mean—why, didn't you see him in town? He went to Los Gatos day before yesterday, to meet you as you came through! That is, his family—"

"His family? Oh, sure—me and Lizzie and Junior." Mr. Carter grinned, then sobered and shook his head. "Nope; I sort of figured he might be here, so I laid over in town last night and asked after Red Hobbins. The sheriff wasn't very polite, so I knew he had run up against Wildcat, but nobody could give me any information."

"I don't like this!" Miss Gutierrez frowned. "Here, wait a minute until I change my clothes. Come in, won't you. No, you can't, we're housecleaning. Well, come into the patio and we can talk—"

"I won't, and I will, but don't you go putting on any style, now," said Carter. "You don't need any trimmings, honest. Just the way you are—"

"Keep quiet! Have you had any breakfast?"

Mr. Carter made signs to indicate that he had not. She led him into the patio, took his Stetson, and indicated a chair.

"Now you can talk—to yourself, until I get back."

The girl departed hurriedly, but Tia Manuela had long ago descried the arrival of Mr. Carter, and was already on the way with a scraped-up breakfast. Before he had finished

this, Miss Inez was with him again, now minus apron and dust-cap.

"Go ahead and smoke if you want to," she offered. "Why on earth did Mr. Carlin tell me all those lies?"

"He's a good liar, when it's a case of lie or die. So am I, for that matter. I suppose Marvin's after his scalp, eh?"

"I don't know," replied the girl helplessly.

"Well, I wouldn't worry a mite, if it wasn't for one thing—his guns being here. How come?"

"I made him leave it here yesterday."

"Uh-huh." Mr. Carter began to fabricate a smoke. "I'm sure obliged for the chuck, Miss Gutierrez! Well, I don't know as I blame Wildcat a bit."

"What for?" she demanded incautiously.

"For leavin' his gun here—if you made him." Carter's eyes twinkled. "If you didn't know he was Carlin, then it's a safe bet nobody else knew it."

"That's enough of compliments," she said, although it was hard to resist the infectious manner of her visitor. "You'd better sober down and look at this thing seriously."

CARTER shook his head. "Now you're asking something that's absolutely impossible," he declared, gravely and earnestly. "Not but what I'd like to do it, but—"

"What are you talking about?"

"Sobering down—when I'm looking at you. What did you suppose? Nobody can look at you and stay close to the ground. That's a fact!"

"Aren't you ever serious?"

"Hardly ever, as the feller in the song says; but suppose you tell me about things here, and I'll try to get my attention on the matter. Maybe if I close my eyes, I can think about it. Go ahead, now—just tell me what Wildcat has done and said while he's been here. That is, all you care to repeat. I judge that he's said plenty you wouldn't want to repeat, especially if there's been any trouble. He has a masterful command of language, that feller has. When he gets real mad, I've heard oldtime desert rats look at him and blush and turn away in shame, yes, ma'am! He's that bad—"

"You seem more or less nimble-tongued yourself," she retorted drily. "Shut your eyes and your mouth, too, and listen."

Carter refused to shut his eyes, but lighted a cigarette and listened attentively while the girl told the little she knew of Carlin's activities.

"Hm!" he said, and inspected his cigarette carefully. "He thinks something is wrong with your foreman, does he? Then I'll bet ten dollars against a white chip that it's so. And that yarn about hearing a shooting scrape up north—that sounds mighty fishy to me. I never heard of two partners' cuttin' loose at each other on the open range, not unless there was mighty bad medicine betwixt 'em; in which case they'd never been in double harness. Nope, it sure don't look good."

Uneasiness grew in the eyes of the girl, for Mr. Carter was now indeniably serious.

"Where d'you think he might be?"

"Prob'bly in jail, or else up north with your roundup outfit. Down in San Juan I heard considerable about the good brand of redeye that's floating around up here. Where can I get some of it?"

"How should I know?" asked the girl, with a slight frostiness.

"By hearsay. You're no dud; and I don't know anybody I'd sooner talk to—yes even me! Those things being true, I bet there's nothing goes on in this here county that you don't hear about. Now, spill it to Sallie Carter like a good girl! 'Cause why, if I can buy a few drinks of the best hootch and listen real hard and keep my mouth shut, there's no telling what I can find out. I bet you'd be surprised by some of the things I could find out that way."

"More than likely." She laughed suddenly. "Well, I don't guarantee the information, but I heard that if you go to the saloon and ask to see 'Miss Lydia Pinkham' in the back room, you can nominate your favorite poison."

"Fair enough." Sallie Carter rose.

"Where are you going?"

"To town, and see if I can find Wildcat and 'Lydia Pinkham'."

"Then wait a minute, till I get my hat, and I'll go too."

"You need a drink that bad?" asked Mr. Carter in pained surprise, and shook his head. "No, ma'am you'd better stay here. I hate to bust up your illusions, but right now I'm loaded up with four guns—and chances are I'll use one or two of 'em. I mean it."

She inspected him, found that he did mean it, and nodded assent. "Very well. Get back for dinner, and bring Mr. Carlin."

"I'll sure try. Thanks."

Mr. Carter departed.

THE MORNING passed without incident. Even the faithful Billy failed to show up with the things from town. Tia Manuela was superintending the dissemination of welcome odors from the kitchen for the noonday meal, when the approach of the brand-new "Lizzie" brought Miss Gutierrez in haste to the entrance. The eagerness died from her face when Mr. Carter jumped out alone.

"Any luck?" she called.

"Plenty, thanks," he returned as she joined him.

She regarded him with some impatience. "Well, spill your luck!" she commanded.

"Oh, I had plenty! You sure slipped me the right password, and I could be buying drinks yet if I wanted to. One was enough, however. All the stories down to San Juan were lies. One drink of the moonshine they make up here was enough to cure my cravings for quite a spell."

"I'm not talking about liquor," she exclaimed. "and you know it! Don't be so tantalizing. Did you hear anything about Carlin?"

"Nope; but I did about Hobbins. I heard a big iron jawed gent inquiring around for him. Williams was his name, and he's a cattleman from up north of here. Said he'd been at the roundup this morning and Hobbins wasn't there, and he wanted to find him. So did I, but the effects of that one drink were still in evidence. Mr. Williams allowed that I was a drunken reprobate, or words to that effect, and went off in his big car."

Despite her anxiety, the girl's eyes twinkled.

"No, Steve doesn't like liquor. Too bad you didn't get acquainted with him. He's an old dear. Well, what did you do next?"

"Got some lunch, then went up to the sheriff's office and swore out a warrant for Red Hobbins, saying he'd held me up south of town early this morning."

"You—what?" The girl sat up and stared. "You did that?"

Mr. Carter nodded morosely. "Yep; that was the only way I had of finding out whether he was in jail, the sheriff and me not being exactly friendly. Well, I sure raised a lot of excitement, but Red Hobbins was not in jail, so I went away."

"And left the warrant to be served?"

"Why not? Let the sheriff hunt him up, sure!"

"Then you didn't get any news at all?"

"Heaps of it," said Mr. Carter. "I'm plumb loaded with news. There's a mail-order catalogue and some letters that look like bills, out in "Lizzie'."

"But nothing about Mr. Carlin?"

"Not a sign. He wrote a letter in the hotel night before last. Had a room saved for him. Went to mail his letter, and that's all anybody knows. His hoss was at the livery, but the boy there said that he'd come and got it last night and saddled up and went. From what Steve Williams said, he ain't up north with your outfit. He ain't in jail. He ain't in town. Nobody knows what he'll do next."

Mr. Carter washed up, got his lunch, and saddled a bronc, departing at a bucking jump.

TOWARD sunset he came back over the rise, with packages adorning his saddle and half riding him from sight; Miss Inez came out to meet him.

"You look cheerful!" said the girl eagerly. "Any news?"

"I got a clue. You see, Wildcat he can black a feller's eye better than anybody I ever knew. He sort of makes it a specialty—"

"Yes, he said he would black yours for sending that post card," said the girl. Mr. Carter looked somewhat taken aback.

"Did he? Dog-gone it, then he'll do it sure! Well, I got no news of Red Hobbins, but I heard a couple o'fellers talking after 'Miss Lydia Pinkham' had loosened them up a mite, and it seems that Tex Winters came through town last night and had a black eye. Didn't you tell me this Tex Winters was a T-In-A-Box rider?"

The girl's eyes were shining.

"Yes; and he was with Marvin on Wednesday too! What else?"

"Nothing. Tex came into town, it seems, from the east, got a fresh horse at the livery, and then drifted on toward home."

"From the east!" repeated the girl, puzzled. "That's queer!"

"How come?" demanded Carter, suddenly alert.

"Put up that poor horse and then come into the office."

In ten minutes Mr. Carter was in the office, looking over the girl's shoulder at the map on the door. She pointed to Los Gatos.

"There's only one road comes in from the east, but it's hardly a road," she explained. "It used to go to Fort Johnson, years ago. Now it ends at a little ranch owned by Tucson Jones. Tex Winters would have no business out that way."

"Hm!" said Carter, narrow-eyed. "Well, nothing doing tonight, with a crippled bronc, but I aim to investigate that rode tomorrow morning!"

IT WAS getting on to nine in the morning before the fat youth appeared.

"I seen a funny thing yesterday night," said Billy, pausing to rest and looking at Inez. "I got the wagon in shape and took a rush order out to Jones's place on the old fort road. You know it? Why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," said the girl hurriedly. "Go on!"

"Somebody's movin' in to Peterson's old shack—you know, that nester that died three years ago! I heard a hoss kicking in the shed, and coming back I went slow. There was two hosses there, and somebody looked at me out'n the window. Yes, sir; I bet a nester's there!"

Mr Carter exchanged a look with the girl.

9

SINCE the time that sudden oblivion had overtaken him, Mr. Jack Carlin most emphatically did not enjoy himself. All he remembered was that something hit him on the head with a tinkly crash, and he got in only one blow to somebody's eye before he went down and out.

That he was now possessed of his own identity beyond further evasion, was impressed upon him by his two captors, who were expecting the momentary arrival of Johnny Marvin. He was also possessed of a cut scalp and a very sore head, and was kept firmly lashed by gentlemen whose understanding of lariats and knots was extremely accurate. Those about his ankles did not bother him because of his boots, but those around his wrists were uncomfortable. The threat that they would become more uncomfortable if dipped in water and allowed to shrink, was successful in keeping him quiet and contented, to all outward seeming.

Carlin had no idea where he was. The building that sheltered him was a ramshackle old ruin made of adobes, rattling boards, and flattened tin cans. The front window still endured, but the others were shattered long since. The floor was of trampled dirt. There was a fireplace in the corner, Mexican style, which served his captors for cooking, and at night the stars shone through the roof.

Much to Carlin's discomfort, and to the obvious uneasiness of his captors, Johnny Marvin did not arrive,

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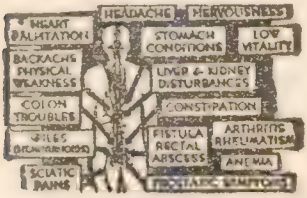

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nor did any word come from him. Occasionally Tex Winters sat down for a cigarette and a chat with the prisoner, but not Reilly. The latter was a surly, slogging big puncher with a perpetual grouch and a fist much like a ham—a freckled brown, smoked ham with the hair intact. He was belted with a huge, old-fashioned revolver.

Toward sundown, a wagon rattled past, and presently chugged past in the other direction. Reilly peered from the window and cursed. Thus learning that he was close to a road of some sort, Mr. Carlin tried to conceive some means of attracting attention, but had to give it up; the hope was as vain as was any chance of getting loose, and this he had long since given up.

By midnight Friday, the uneasiness of Tex Winters reached its climax. Reilly was not a whit disturbed over not hearing from Johnny Marvin. He was entirely satisfied to obey orders and wait here until doomsday if necessary, but it was otherwise with Tex Winters. Finally Carlin suggested that perhaps Johnny Marvin himself did not know just where the captive was being held—and this was true. In his note directing the capture, Marvin had mentioned several likely places, and Tex Winters had hopefully awaited some further word. So, Mr. Winters saddled up his horse and departed.

Left alone with Reilly, Carlin vainly tried to lure his guard into conversation. Reilly ordered him to shut up, and when Carlin mentioned certain sums of money that might easily be earned, brought in a bucket of water into which the prisoner's bound wrists could be dipped. Carlin relapsed into silence.

There was no lamp in the shack. Presently, Reilly sat in the doorway until his cigarette was ash, then he came inside, rolled up in his blankets, and went to sleep.

CARLIN took heart from this, for previously he had not been left unguarded even at night. He recalled all the tales he had read, all the carnivals he had seen, all the handcuff wizards that had performed for his

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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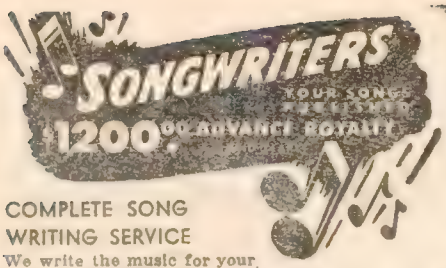

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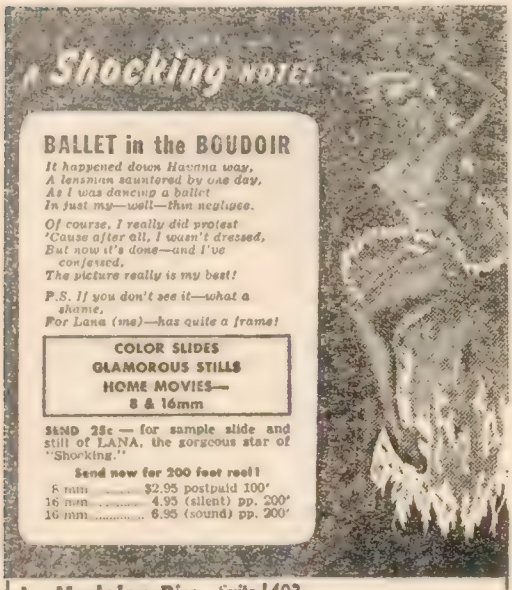
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benefit; and hopefully set to work. He was forced to the conclusion that neither in stories, nor on the stage was the hero tied up with a plaited raw-hide lariat. Even the fact that his hands were together in front, instead of at his back, proved of no avail. At last, with a stiff neck and sore lips from trying to bite through the leather, he desisted. He thought longingly of the knife over in the corner, with which Reilly had hacked open the tin of beans; but he had previously learned that Reilly slept like a cat and any attempt to roll across the floor would be fruitless.

Fate's agin' me, he decided; *and it'll be worse agin' me if Marvin gets here before tomorrow afternoon! If I could only get rid of Reilly for about two minutes—*

On this thought he fell asleep, with hope resurgent.

With daylight into the shack, Carlin sat up and leaned back against the wall. Reilly arose. "You can rest a while now, until I get them hosses fed and watered," he said, and stalked out the doorway.

Reilly was gone a long time. He finally showed up with some small wood, then went back and got more. With this supply, he got a fire started and set on the tin coffee-pot to boil. From the nearly empty sack of provisions he brought a very stale loaf of bread and hacked it up, then another tin of beans, which he proceeded to open. He scraped out the beans on the unwashed plate, and paused to roll a cigarette.

"The menu ain't varied, but I've eaten worse," observed Carlin, and determined that it was time to shoot his bolt. "Marvin gets arrested at noon today for rustling Dosados stock. What you going to do then? Steve Williams has the goods on him, and has Joe Grant bottled up with a full confession."

"Huh!" grunted Reilly. "Nothin' to me—but you're late in springing that yarn."

"Gosh, you're getting talkative!" said Carlin admiringly. "Well, if it's nothing to you, all right. You go to the pen for kidnapping, you know, so you'll be keeping Johnny Marvin and Clonmel company."

"Any time they get Johnny Marvin, I'll go," scoffed Reilly. "Now shut up. Marvin'll be here before noon, anyhow."

"Wish you'd give me some legroom."

"Shut up!"

Carlin obeyed. He hitched himself along the wall, until he was resting against it with his knees drawn up and his numbly aching wrists between them.

It might all have been a heap different if the senorita, bless her heart, hadn't made me leave my gun behind! he thought, then started suddenly. *By gosh! I wonder if Clonmel found that gun—with my name etched on it? Well, no matter now.*

"Goin' to wait till noon for breakfast?" he said aloud.

"Shut up," returned Reilly, with renewed surliness.

Reilly dropped the knife point first into the earthen floor. Then he examined the coffee, and poured out some into the tin cup, which he set beside his captive. He found the one spoon, and stuck it into the plate of beans, and brought this toward Carlin.

CARLIN shifted his position, lost balance, and fell over sideways, rolling on his back with a muttered oath. He drew up his knees, and an expression of anguish came into his face.

"Gosh, I'm all cramped up!" he groaned.

Reilly uttered a growl, then set

[*Turn Page*]

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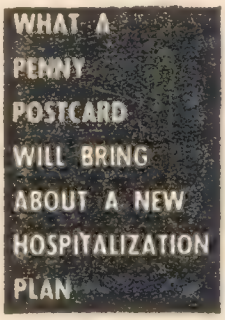

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down the plate. He leaned over Carlin and reached for the latter's bound hands—and just then Mr. Carlin released his drawn-up knees.

Both feet, bound together, shot upward with all the force he could put into the kick—and since he lay on the floor, it was force enough. His boots, with perfect unanimity, landed in the pit of Reilly's stomach as the unfortunate T-InN A-Box rider leaned over.

"*O-oof!*" Reilly made a noise like an exploding grenade. Then, losing his balance, he staggered backward across the room, suddenly went limp, and collapsed against the opposite wall with a low groan. There was a crash, the walls shook, and silence descended on the shack.

"You never can tell about wildcats, feller!" said Mr. Carlin, and chuckled.

He rolled over, put out his two hands, and got the knife-half between his fingers, which had little strength in them. However, he managed to slash his feet loose, then reversed the knife and held it between his fingers, which had little lashings against the edge. Two minutes of this sufficed to free his hands, and he leaped up.

These two minutes, however, had also served to allow some air to make entry into Reilly's carcass, and the big puncher showed symptoms of returning life. As Carlin leaped toward him, his hand instinctively brought out his forty-five and his eyes came open. Carlin snatched at the weapon and knocked it clear, but failed to keep it. His hands were still so numbed and devoid of life from their lashings, that they were of little use to him. The revolver fell into the doorway.

"I hate to do it, but it's Hobson's choice," said Carlin, swinging his toe for the chin of his recumbent captor. Reilly vaguely sensed the blow, and avoided its full force, while Carlin was over-balanced and threw out a hand against the wall for support. Reilly lumbered erect.

He stood there huge and glowering. Carlin lashed out at him, and drove home two blows to the chin,

[*Turn To Page 92*]

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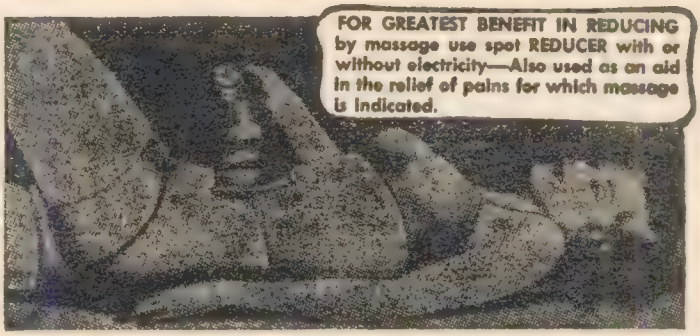

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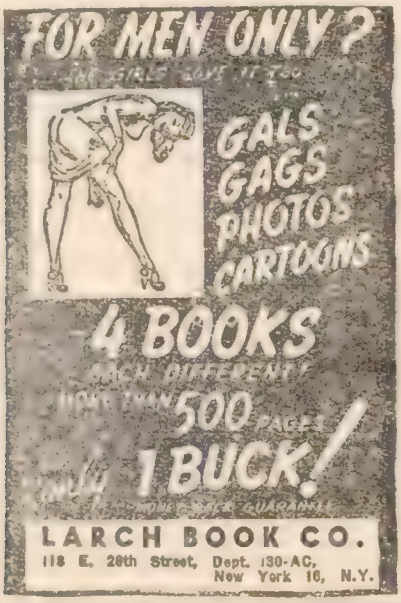

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with absolutely no effect. Indeed, those blows seemed to clear Reilly's fogged wits. A bellow broke from him, and he rushed at Carlin. The latter, sensing the futility of his puffed and swollen fists, evaded the rush and darted for the revolver.

Before he could stoop for it, Reilly hurled himself forward. There was no escape, and Carlin met him halfway with a smashing stomach blow that halted Reilly. Then the two stood face to face and slugged. Carlin felt himself smashed backward, felt that his blows had no effect. Reilly might have won his fight then and there, had he been content to use his fists. Instead, he drove out a savage kick, intended to disable the lighter man.

Swift as light, Carlin caught the upcoming foot and heaved. Reilly went crashing over, and Carlin swung about with perfect timing, all his weight behind the blow. It caught Reilly as he was falling, caught him squarely behind the ear and drove him headfirst in the wall of the shack. The rain-weakened adobes gave way under his weight, and half the wall above came crashing down over him. He lay there, inert, knocked out at last.

Carlin spent no time in worrying over his opponent. He had all he could do to keep his feet. Weakened as he was by that crack on the head, Reilly's smashing blows left him dizzy and done up.

None the less, he did not forget the revolver in the dust. With that, and his horse from the lean-to shed in back, a swallow of hot coffee to hearten him, all would be well. He leaned over to pick up the weapon—and staggered. The blood rushed to his hurt head with a frightful access of pain. Dimly he sensed his mistake, but too late. As he tried to straighten up, everything went black.

He slumped down above the revolver and lay there senseless, his haggard features very white in the morning light.

It was perhaps five minutes later that Clonmel and Johnny Marvin, rode up and dismounted to stare at the scene which greeted them.

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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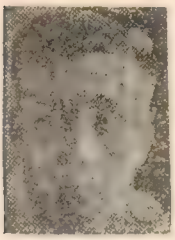

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

10

GET REILLY away from here in a hurry."

These words, in the powerful biting voice of Johnny Marvin, slowly pierced to the numbed brain of Carlin. Once started, his wakening was rapid. One hand was twisted beneath him and hurt cruelly against some object, but he dared not move. He lay quiet, listening, every sense intent upon what was going on. He knew that Marvin and Clonmel had arrived. His fight had been in vain.

"Wake the fool up," came the voice of Marvin again, rasped by impatience. "Carlin's alive—I felt his heart beating. Get Reilly out of here before we finish it."

There came the sounds of labor, as Clonmel worked to extricate the hapless Reilly. Carlin gathered that Marvin was standing close beside him, probably keeping an eye on him. Since Carlin lay half on his face, half on his side, and conjectured that Marvin was in front of him, he dared not flicker an eyelid.

An oath came from Clonmel. "What a face! I'd hate to stand up to that redhead, if he done this to Reilly—ah, he's coming around. Come on, feller, wake up!"

There was a bull-like roar as Reilly waked up, scrambled to his feet, and flung Clonmel aside. Then he peered about through puffed eyes, as he discovered that Carlin no longer faced him.

"Who's that—you, Johnny? Huh? Where is he?"

"Yes, I'm here," said Marvin. "Come along; saddle up and get out of here. No; take my horse, out there by the road. Move lively!" Then he breathed, low-voiced: "Lordy, you sure caught hell!"

Mr. Carlin agreed with this sentiment, and strongly desired to view the scenery for himself, but thought better of the impulse.

"By golly," said Reilly, bubbling a harsh laugh, "you-all got here after all, huh? I told him you'd never get arrested before noon."

"What's that?" snapped Marvin, his voice like a whiplash. "You told him —what?"

"No flies on Johnny Marvin, that's what!" Reilly chuckled. "He tried to tell me you'd be pinched at noon for rustling stock from the Dosados—the durned fool! Said Steve Williams had the goods on you—and that Joe Grant had confessed—"

A tense, hoarse oath escaped Clonmel. Marvin caught his breath sharply, then collected himself and spoke with his usual coolness.

"All right, Reilly. Drift along to town and get yourself looked after. Move sharp, before your eyes close up."

"Gettin' so I can't see right now," mumbled Reilly.

Steps crunched close beside the prostrate man—so close that only with an effort did Carlin keep from shrinking. He could not repress a slight start as a foot stirred his shoulders, then again.

"He's safe," said Marvin's voice, sharp-edged. "Hurry that fool away! We'll have to get their horses out before we fire the place."

"Go and be doin' it then," returned Clonmel. "I'll keep an eye on Carlin while I'm gettin' this cripple off."

ONLY THE fact that Clonmel was glancing back at him kept Carlin quiet. His head was hurting painfully. yet he darted not shift his weight. The words of Marvin showed him all too clearly what was intended.

Unable to endure the hurt of his hand, he shifted his hip off it, and moved his fingers. They closed on the object that lay beneath him, that had been crushed against his hand. It was Reilly's old-fashioned revolver.

A tremor ran through him at the recognition. Then he relaxed again.

"Make time, now! Give the hoss his head," came Clonmel's voice, in admonition. Then, more sharply, as Clonmel turned back toward the shack: "Got them broncs out yet, Johnny? All right, he's off."

[*Turn Page*]

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There came a crash of brush and the thud of hoofs.

"I'll take Reilly's," said Marvin's voice. "The other is a Dosados bronc. Better turn him loose—gidap! Off you go!"

The slap of hand on rump echoed the words.

"This is a hell of a note!" exclaimed Clonmel, in mingled disgust and alarm. "Now we know what happened to Joe Grant and Pecos. This cuss got Pecos, and caught Joe. Just think of the way he lied to us!"

"We're in for it," agreed Marvin coolly; "but don't get cold feet now. Clonmel. With Carlin out of the way, we can saddle the blame on Pecos and Joe."

"But he claimed Joe had confessed!"

"Bosh! What if he has? Will his word stand against ours? Will any jury in this county believe that I'm a rustler? Bosh! Cool down, I tell you. We've got a mean job to do here, but it's got to be done. Give Reilly time to get away. We can't let him know too much, and if he heard the shot he'd suspect."

"Damn Reilly!" growled Clonmel. "Anyhow, he'll hear nothing. He's so bad bunged up that he's deaf, dumb, and blind by this time. All he can do is pull leather and hang on. Well, who's to do the job?"

"Toss a coin," said Marvin. "One fires the shot, the other sets the fire. Suit you?"

"All right. Here or inside?"

"We'd better lift him inside first," Marvin answered. "Grab his feet."

It had come.

With his thumb, Carlin drew back and held the hammer of the revolver which he had gripped. He felt Marvin's breath in his face as the rancher leaned over and caught hold of his shoulders. He felt Clonmel lift his feet. As he came up in air, he turned over and opened his eyes—and fired.

CLONMEL knew what was coming—knew it in the fraction of a second as Carlin looked up at him and the revolver came into sight. He had no chance to act on the knowledge, however. Carlin's feet struck the ground heavily, Clonmel grunted, then went backward as though

knocked by a blow. He did not get up.

With the lithe twist of a snake, Carlin tried to jerk up the weapon and shoot Marvin, behind and above him, but missed Marvin loosed his hold, and Carlin struck the ground even before Clonmel fell. As he struck, however, he kept on twisting. This movement saved him. He felt the bullet-stroke just before his face, heard the burst of the pistol in Marvin's hand. Then, throwing out his arm, he fired.

Marvin screamed on a high, shrill note.

Jack Carlin scrambled to his feet. He had no need to look at Clonmel again. He had shot to kill, that first time. He gave all his attention to Marvin, and gasped at what he saw.

Marvin, his knee smashed and the leg doubled under him, was rising on one arm, the other throwing up his pistol, his stark blue eyes glaring madness. Carlin jerked his arm forward and fired again, barely in time. Marvin's pistol echoed the shot but the bullet went afar and the weapon itself was jerked a dozen feet away. Marvin's hand fell and dripped blood, and the man let himself fall into the dust.

"Nope, I want you alive—and I got you where I want you," said Carlin. "If you ask me, that there shot from the ground was some shot, Johnny. Takin' into consideration that I'm using a strange gun, and a big forty-five at that. I'd say it was about the best shot I ever made."

Marvin glared at him and half rose again. "Kick my gun here, damn you!" he cried hoarsely. "I can't stand the disgrace."

Carlin shook his head. "Should ha' thought o' that before you set in to rob a girl, Johnny. Nope, you and Joe Grant are both headed the same way now—unless you hang yourself in your cell; and I reckon you're not coward enough to take that way out, in cold blood."

Marvin dropped forward and fell down senseless.

Somehow, Carlin got to him; that last fall had set his ears to ringing again. He lowered himself beside Marvin and examined the latter's injuries. The right knee was shattered, the right hand was barely scraped. When he had bound Marvin's hands firmly behind his back, Carlin gave his attention to the wounded knee and made the best job possible of bandaging it.

HE DRAGGED himself to the doorway, leaned against the frame, and for a moment gave way to the reaction. Things were swirling darkly around him when he heard the rattle of a wagon, and looked up dimly. His vision cleared, as Sallie Carter came leaping toward him—and behind Sallie, a girl whose golden hair blew loosely in the wind as she ran.

"Howdy, folks," he said, with the shadow of his old smile.

"Jack! You're hurt?" exclaimed Carter sharply. "Oh, my goshfry! Get out of this, girl; get out!"

"Be quiet," said Miss Gutierrez, although her face was white as she came forward. "Are you hurt?"

"Who, me? Nary a bit, barring scratches—but I need a drink mighty bad," said Carlin. "Sorry I had to spoil your foreman, but I got Marvin all safe. Sallie, you'd better lug him, and look out for his busted leg. Sorry I ain't up to helping you. Be right careful of him. I need him for a grand jury or two to sit on. Miss Inez, step inside and get me that coffee-pot, will you? There's a good swig left in it."

The girl darted inside the shack. Carter surveyed the scene, then turned to Carlin.

"Durn it, we got held up in town!" he exclaimed. "Lot of excitement going on. Alvarado and a strange gent got in this morning, swore out some warrants, and went on north, and half the population is streaming up towards Pugar Canon. When we heard those shots, we came along fast."

"You missed a blamed good show," said Carlin. "Give me a boost up—I'm sort of unsteady on my pins."

CARTER helped him up, and the girl came with the coffee-pot. Jack Carlin seized it and drained it,

[*Turn Page*]

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and then spat out grounds. Suddenly he looked at Carter.

"See here, Sallie, what you mean sending post-cards for folks to read, huh?"

"Nothin' at all, Jack," said Mr. Carter; "but I hear you're goin' to give me a black eye on account of it. That true?"

"It's mighty true," returned Carlin soberly. "I'm aiming to give you the finest black eye you ever saw, feller—but not now. Say! Did you pass a puncher heading toward town?"

"We passed a human wreck, if he's the one you mean," said Sallie, rolling a cigarette and passing it over. "Take this. I told Miss Inez it was your mark on him, but we were in too much of a hurry to stop."

"Well, I'll gather him in later on. You load Marvin into that wagon and take your time doing it, *sabe*?" With this, Carlin turned to the girl, and his smile flickered out. "See here, Miss Inez, I'm mighty sorry you jumped in on things like this. It's a might bad sight for your pretty eyes, and me needing a shave."

"Oh, please!" The girl's voice broke, as she caught his hand, and tears were in her eyes. "Please don't talk like that! Come in here and sit down, and let me look at that cut head of yours."

"Well," said Mr. Carlin, throwing a look at Sallie Carter and grimacing savagely in the direction of "Lizzie", "well, I reckon I will, seeing it's you—"

They vanished inside the shack.

Sallie Carter shoved back his hat and scratched his curly head, a whimsical expression on his face. He looked at the unconscious Marvin, looked at "Lizzie", and then rolled himself a smoke. When he had lighted it, he exhaled slowly, and shook his head.

"Prettiest girl I've seen in seven counties—and here I clear forgot!" he soliloquized mournfully. "Well, anybody that monkeys with Wildcat sure deserves all they get; and that's all I got to say! Just my luck," and he turned to his task.

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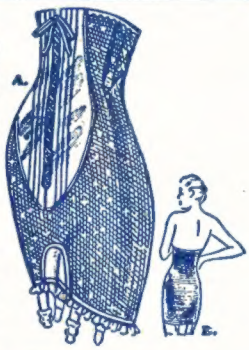

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